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THELMA.



T H E L M A .

A SOCIETY NOVEL.

BY

MARIE CORELLI,

AUTHOR OF

“A ROMANCE OF TWO WORLDS” AND “VENDETTA !”

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



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1887.

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BOOK II.

(Continued.)

THE LAND OF MOCKERY.



THELMA.

CHAPTER VII.

"A generous fierceness dwells with innocence,
And conscious virtue is allowed some pride."

DRYDEN.

THE melancholy days of autumn came on apace, and by-and-by the Manor was deserted. The Bruce-Errington establishment removed again to town, where business, connected with his intending membership for Parliament, occupied Sir Philip from morning till night. The old insidious feeling of depression returned and hovered over Thelma's mind like a black bird of ill omen, and though she did her best to shake it off she could not succeed. People began to notice her deepening seriousness and the wistful melancholy of her blue eyes, and made their remarks thereon when they saw her at Marcia Van Clupp's wedding, an event which came off brilliantly at the commencement of November, and which was almost entirely presided over by

Mrs. Rush-Marvelle. That far-seeing matron had indeed urged on the wedding by every delicate expedient possible.

“Long engagements are a great mistake,” she told Marcia,—then, in a warning undertone she added, “Men are capricious nowadays,—they’re all so much in demand,—better take Masherville while he’s in the humour.”

Marcia accepted this hint and took him,—and Mrs. Rush-Marvelle heaved a sigh of relief when she saw the twain safely married and off to the Continent on their honeymoon-trip,—Marcia all sparkling and triumphant,—Lord Algy tremulous and feebly ecstatic.

“Thank Heaven *that’s* over!” she said to her polite and servile husband. “I never had such a troublesome business in my life! That girl’s been nearly two seasons on my hands, and I think five hundred guineas not a bit too much for all I’ve done.”

“Not a bit—not a bit!” agreed Mr. Marvelle warmly. “Have they—have they——” here he put on a most benevolent side-look—“quite settled with you, my dear?”

“Every penny,” replied Mrs. Marvelle calmly. “Old Van Clupp paid me the last hundred this morning. And poor Mrs. Van Clupp is so *very* grateful!” She sighed placidly, and appeared to meditate. Then she smiled sweetly and, approaching Mr. Marvelle, patted his shoulder caressingly.

“I think we’ll do the Italian lakes, dear—what do you say?”

“Charming—charming!” declared, not her lord and master, but her slave and vassal. “Nothing could be more delightful!”

And to the Italian lakes accordingly they went. A great many people were out of town,—all who had leisure and money enough to liberate themselves from the approaching evils of an English winter, had departed or were departing,—Beau Lovelace had gone to Como,—George Lorimer had returned with Duprèz to Paris, and Thelma had very few visitors except Lady Winsleigh, who was more often with her now than ever. In fact, her ladyship was more like one of the Errington household than anything else,—she came so frequently and stayed so long. She seemed sincerely attached to Thelma,—and Thelma herself, too single-hearted and simple to imagine that such affection could be feigned, gave her in return, what Lady Winsleigh had never succeeded in winning from any woman,—a pure, trusting, and utterly unsuspecting love, such as she would have lavished on a twin-born sister. But there was one person who was not deceived by Lady Winsleigh’s charm of manner, and grace of speech. This was Britta. Her keen eyes flashed a sort of unuttered defiance into her ladyship’s beautiful, dark languishing ones—she distrusted her, and viewed the intimacy between her and the “Fröken”

with entire disfavour. Once she ventured to express something of her feeling on the matter to Thelma—but Thelma had looked so gently wondering and reproachful that Britta had not courage to go on.

“I am so sorry, Britta,” said her mistress, “that you do not like Lady Winsleigh—because I am very fond of her. You must try to like her for my sake.”

But Britta pursed her lips and shook her head obstinately. However, she said no more at the time, and decided within herself to wait and watch the course of events. And in the meantime she became very intimate with Lady Winsleigh’s maid, Louise Rénaud, and Briggs, and learned from these two domestic authorities many things which greatly tormented and puzzled her little brain,—things over which she pondered deeply without arriving at any satisfactory conclusion.

On her return to town, Thelma had been inexpressibly shocked at the changed appearance of her husband’s secretary, Edward Neville. At first she scarcely knew him, he had altered so greatly. Always inclined to stoop, his shoulders were now bent as by the added weight of twenty years—his hair, once only grizzled, was now quite grey—his face was deeply sunken and pale, and his eyes by contrast looked large and wild, as though some haunting thought were driving him to madness. He shrank so nervously from her

gaze, that she began to fancy he must have taken some dislike to her,—and though she delicately refrained from pressing questions upon him personally, she spoke to her husband about him, with real solicitude. “Is Mr. Neville working too hard?” she asked one day. “He looks very ill.”

Her remark seemed to embarrass Philip,—he coloured and seemed confused.

“Does he? Oh, I suppose he sleeps badly. Yes, I remember, he told me so. You see, the loss of his wife has always preyed on his mind—he never loses hope of—of—that is—he is always trying to—you know!—to get her back again.”

“But do you think he will ever find her?” asked Thelma. “I thought you said it was a hopeless case?”

“Well—I think so, certainly—but, you see, it’s no good dashing his hopes—one never knows—she *might* turn up any day—it’s a sort of chance!”

“I wish I could help him to search for her,” she said compassionately. “His eyes do look so full of sorrow,” she paused and added musingly, “almost like Sigurd’s eyes sometimes.”

“Oh, he’s not losing his wits,” said Philip hastily, “he’s quite patient, and—and all that sort of thing. Don’t bother about him, Thelma, he’s all right!”

And he fumbled hastily with some papers, and began to talk of something else. His embarrassed

manner caused her to wonder a little at the time as to the reason of it,—but she had many other things to think about, and she soon forgot a conversation that might have proved a small guiding-link in the chain of events that were soon about to follow quickly one upon another, shaking her life to its very foundation. Lady Winsleigh found it almost impossible to get her on the subject of the burlesque actress, Violet Vere, and Sir Philip's supposed admiration for that notorious stage-siren.

"I do not believe it," she said firmly, "and you—you must not believe it either, Clara. For wherever you heard it, it is wrong. We should dishonour Philip by such a thought—you are his friend, and I am his wife—we are not the ones to believe anything against him, even if it could be proved—and there are no proofs."

"My dear," responded her ladyship easily. "You can get proofs for yourself if you like. For instance, ask Sir Philip how often he has seen Miss Vere lately,—and hear what he says."

Thelma coloured deeply. "I would not question my husband on such a subject," she said proudly.

"Oh well! if you are so fastidious!" And Lady Winsleigh shrugged her shoulders.

"I am not fastidious," returned Thelma, "only I do wish to be worthy of his love,—and I should not be so if I doubted him. No, Clara, I will trust him to the end."

Clara Winsleigh drew nearer to her, and took her hand.

“Even if he were unfaithful to you?” she asked in a low, impressive tone.

“Unfaithful!” Thelma uttered the word with a little cry. “Clara, dear Clara, you must not say such a word! Unfaithful! That means that my husband would love some one more than me!—ah! that is impossible!”

“Suppose it were possible?” persisted Lady Winsleigh, with a cruel light in her dark eyes. “Such things have been!”

Thelma stood motionless, a deeply mournful expression on her fair, pale face. She seemed to think for a moment, then she spoke.

“I would never believe it!” she said solemnly. “Never, unless I heard it from his own lips, or saw it in his own writing, that he was weary of me, and wanted me no more.”

“And then?”

“Then”—she drew a quick breath—“I should know what to do. But, Clara, you must understand me well, even if this were so, I should never blame him—no—not once!”

“Not blame him?” cried Lady Winsleigh impatiently. “Not blame him for infidelity?”

A deep blush swept over her face at the hated word, “infidelity,” but she answered steadily—

“No. Because, you see, it would be my fault, not his. When you hold a flower in your hand

for a long time, till all its fragrance has gone, and you drop it because it no longer smells sweetly—you are not to blame—it is natural you should wish to have something fresh and fragrant,—it is the flower's fault because it could not keep its scent long enough to please you. Now, if Philip were to love me no longer, I should be like that flower, and how would *he* be to blame? He would be good as ever, but I—I should have ceased to seem pleasant to him—that is all!”

She put this strange view of the case quite calmly, as if it were the only solution to the question. Lady Winsleigh heard her, half in contemptuous amusement, half in dismay. “What can I do with such a woman as this,” she thought. “And fancy Lennie imagining for a moment that *he* could have any power over her!” Aloud, she said—

“Thelma, you're the oddest creature going—a regular heathen child from Norway! You've set up your husband as an idol, and you're always on your knees before him. It's awfully sweet of you, but it's quite absurd, all the same. Angelic wives always get the worst of it, and so you'll see! Haven't you heard that?”

“Yes, I have heard it,” she answered, smiling a little. “But only since I came to London. In Norway, it is taught to women that to be patient and obedient, is best for every one. It is not so here. But I am not an angelic wife, Clara, and so

the 'worst of it' will not apply to me. Indeed, I do not know of any 'worst' that I would not bear for Philip's sake."

Lady Winsleigh studied the lovely face, eloquent with love and truth, for some moments in silence;—a kind of compunction pricked her conscience. Why destroy all that beautiful faith? Why wound that grandly trusting nature? The feeling was but momentary.

"Philip *does* run after the Vere," she said to herself—"it's true, there's no mistake about it, and she ought to know of it. But she won't believe without proofs—what proofs can I get, I wonder?" And her scheming brain set to work to solve this problem.

In justice to her, it must be admitted, she had a good deal of seeming truth on her side. Sir Philip's name *had* somehow got connected with that of the leading actress at the Brilliant, and more people than Lady Winsleigh began to make jocose whispering comments on his stage "*amour*,"—comments behind his back, which he was totally unaware of. Nobody knew quite how the rumour had first been started. Sir Francis Lennox seemed to know a good deal about it, and he was an "intimate" of the "Vere" magic circle of attraction. And though they talked, no one ventured to say anything to Sir Philip himself;—the only two among his friends who would have spoken out honestly were Beau Lovelace and Lorimer, and these were absent.

One evening, contrary to his usual custom, Sir Philip went out after the late dinner. Before leaving, he kissed his wife tenderly, and told her on no account to sit up for him—he and Neville were going to attend to a little matter of business which might detain them longer than they could calculate. After they had gone, Thelma resigned herself to a lonely evening, and, stirring the fire in the drawing-room to a cheerful blaze, she sat down beside it. First, she amused herself by reading over some letters recently received from her father,—and then, yielding to a sudden fancy, she drew her spinning-wheel from the corner where it always stood, and set it in motion. She had little time for spinning now, but she never quite gave it up, and as the low, familiar whirring sound hummed pleasantly on her ears, she smiled, thinking how quaint and almost incongruous her simple implement of industry looked among all the luxurious furniture and costly nick-nacks by which she was surrounded.

“I ought to have one of my old gowns on,” she half murmured, glancing down at the pale-blue silk robe she wore,—“I am too fine to spin!”

And she almost laughed as the wheel flew round swiftly under her graceful manipulations. Listening to its whirr, whirr, whirr, she scarcely heard a sudden knock at the street-door, and was quite startled when the servant, Morris, announced—

“Sir Francis Lennox!”

Surprised, she rose from her seat at the spinning-wheel with a slight air of hauteur. Sir Francis, who had never in his life seen a lady of title and fashion in London engaged in the primitive occupation of spinning, was entirely delighted with the picture before him,—the tall, lovely woman with her gold hair and shimmering blue draperies, standing with such stateliness beside the simple wooden wheel, the antique emblem of household industry. Instinctively he thought of Marguerite;—but Marguerite as a crowned queen, superior to all temptations of either man or fiend.

“Sir Philip is out,” she said, as she suffered him to take her hand.

“So I was aware!” returned Lennox easily. “I saw him a little while ago at the door of the Brilliant Theatre.”

She turned very pale,—then controlling the rapid beating of her heart by a strong effort, she forced a careless smile, and said bravely—

“Did you? I am very glad—for he will have some amusement there, perhaps, and that will do him good. He has been working so hard!”

She paused. He said nothing, and she went on more cheerfully still—

“Is it not a very dismal, wet evening! Yes!—and you must be cold. Will you have some tea?”

"Tha-anks!" drawled Sir Francis, staring at her admiringly. "If it's not too much trouble——"

"Oh no!" said Thelma. "Why should it be?" And she rang the bell and gave the order. Sir Francis sank lazily back in an easy chair, and stroked his moustache slowly. He knew that his random hit about the theatre had struck home,—but she allowed the arrow to pierce and possibly wound her heart without showing any outward sign of discomposure. "A plucky woman!" he considered, and wondered how he should make his next move. She, meanwhile, smiled at him frankly, and gave a light twirl to her spinning-wheel.

"You see!" she said, "I was amusing myself this evening by imagining that I was once more at home in Norway."

"Pray don't let me interrupt the amusement," he responded, with a sleepy look of satisfaction shooting from beneath his eyelids. "Go on spinning, Lady Errington! . . . I've never seen any one spin before."

At that moment Morris appeared with the tea, and handed it to Sir Francis,—Thelma took none, and as the servant retired, she quietly resumed her occupation. There was a short silence, only broken by the hum of the wheel. Sir Francis sipped his tea with a meditative air, and studied the fair woman before him as critically as he would have studied a picture.

"I hope I'm not in your way?" he asked suddenly. She looked up surprised.

"Oh no—only I am sorry Philip is not here to talk to you. It would be so much pleasanter."

"Would it?" he murmured rather dubiously and smiling. "Well—I shall be quite contented if *you* will talk to me, Lady Errington!"

"Ah, but I am not at all clever in conversation," responded Thelma quite seriously. "I am sure you, as well as many others, must have noticed that. I never do seem to say exactly the right thing to please everybody. Is it not very unfortunate?"

He laughed a little. "I have yet to learn in what way you do *not* please everybody," he said, dropping his voice to a low, caressing cadence. "Who, that sees you, does not admire—and—and love you?"

She met his languorous gaze without embarrassment,—while the childlike openness of her regard confused and slightly shamed him.

"Admire me? Oh yes!" she said somewhat plaintively. "It is that of which I am so weary! Because God has made one pleasant in form and face,—to be stared at and whispered about, and have all one's dresses copied!—all that is so small and common and mean, and does vex me so much!"

"It is the penalty you pay for being beautiful," said Sir Francis slowly, wondering within himself

at the extraordinary incongruity of a feminine creature who was actually tired of admiration.

She made no reply—the wheel went round faster than before. Presently Lennox set aside his emptied cup, and drawing his chair a little closer to hers, asked—

“When does Errington return?”

“I cannot tell you,” she answered. “He said that he might be late. Mr. Neville is with him.”

There was another silence. “Lady Errington,” said Sir Francis abruptly—“pray excuse me—I speak as a friend, and in your interests,—how long is this to last?”

The wheel stopped. She raised her eyes,—they were grave and steady.

“I do not understand you,” she returned quietly. “What is it that you mean?”

He hesitated—then went on, with lowered eyelids and a half-smile.

“I mean—what all our set’s talking about—Errington’s queer fancy for that actress at the Brilliant.”

Thelma still gazed at him fixedly. “It is a mistake,” she said resolutely, “altogether a mistake. And as you are his friend, Sir Francis, you will please contradict this report—which is wrong, and may do Philip harm. It has no truth in it at all——”

“No truth!” exclaimed Lennox. “It’s true as Gospel! Lady Errington, I’m sorry for it—

but your husband is deceiving you most shamefully!"

"How dare you say such a thing!" she cried, springing upright and facing him.—then she stopped and grew very pale—but she kept her eyes upon him. How bright they were! What a chilling pride glittered in their sea-blue depths!

"You are in error," she said coldly. "If it is wrong to visit this theatre you speak of, why are *you* so often seen there—and why is not some harm said of *you*? It is not your place to speak against my husband. It is shameful and treacherous! You do forget yourself most wickedly!"

And she moved to leave the room. But Sir Francis interposed.

"Lady Errington," he said very gently, "don't be hard upon me—pray forgive me! Of course I've no business to speak—but how can I help it? When I hear every one at the clubs discussing you, and pitying you, it's impossible to listen quite unmoved! I'm the least among your friends, I know,—but I can't bear this sort of thing to go on,—the whole affair will be dished up in the society papers next!"

And he paced the room half impatiently,—a very well-feigned expression of friendly concern and sympathy on his features. Thelma stood motionless, a little bewildered—her head throbbed achingly, and there was a sick sensation of numbness creeping about her.

“I tell you it is all wrong!” she repeated with an effort. “I do not understand why these people at the clubs should talk of me, or pity me. I do not need any pity! My husband is all goodness and truth,”—she stopped and gathered courage as she went on. “Yes! he is better, braver, nobler than all other men in the world, it seems to me! He gives me all the joy of my life—each day and night I thank God for the blessing of his love!”

She paused again. Sir Francis turned and looked at her steadily. A sudden thought seemed to strike her, for she advanced eagerly, a sweet colour flushing the pallor of her skin.

“You can do so much for me if you will!” she said, laying her hand on his arm. “You can tell all these people who talk so foolishly that they are wrong,—tell them how happy I am! And that my Philip has never deceived me in any matter, great or small!”

“Never?” he asked with a slight sneer. “You are sure?”

“Sure!” she answered bravely. “He would keep nothing from me that it was necessary or good for me to know. And I—oh! I might pass all my life in striving to please him, and yet I should never, never be worthy of all his tenderness and goodness! And that he goes many times to a theatre without me—what is it? A mere nothing—a trifle to laugh at! It is

not needful to tell me of such a small circumstance !”

As she spoke she smiled—her form seemed to dilate with a sort of inner confidence and rapture.

Sir Francis stared at her half shamed,—half savage. The beautiful, appealing face, bright with simple trust, roused him to no sort of manly respect or forbearance,—the very touch of the blossom-white hand she had laid so innocently on his arm, stung his passion as with a lash,—as he had said, he was fond of hunting—he had chased the unconscious deer all through the summer, and now that it had turned to bay with such pitiful mildness and sweet pleading, why not draw the knife across its slim throat without mercy ?

“ Really, Lady Errington !” he said at last sarcastically. “ Your wifely enthusiasm and confidence are indeed charming ! But, unfortunately, the proofs are all against you. Truth is truth, however much you may wish to blind your eyes to its manifestations. I sincerely wish Sir Philip were present to hear your eloquent praises of him, instead of being where he most undoubtedly is,—in the arms of Violet Vere !”

As he said these words she started away from him and put her hands to her ears as though to shut out some discordant sound—her eyes glowed feverishly. A cold shiver shook her from head to foot.

“ That is false—false !” she muttered in a

low, choked voice. "How can you—how dare you?"

She ceased, and with a swaying, bewildered movement, as though she were blind, she fell senseless at his feet.

In one second he was kneeling beside her. He raised her head on his arm,—he gazed eagerly on her fair, still features. A dark contraction of his brows showed that his thoughts were not altogether righteous ones. Suddenly he laid her down again gently, and, springing to the door, locked it. Returning, he once more lifted her in a half-reclining position, and encircling her with his arms, drew her close to his breast and kissed her. He was in no hurry for her to recover—she looked very beautiful—she was helpless—she was in his power. The silvery ting-ting of the clock on the mantel-piece striking eleven, startled him a little—he listened painfully—he thought he heard some one trying the handle of the door he had locked. Again—again he kissed those pale, unconscious lips! Presently, a slight shiver ran through her frame—she sighed, and a little moan escaped her. Gradually, as warmth and sensation returned to her, she felt the pressure of his embrace, and murmured—

"Philip! Darling,—you have come back earlier,—I thought——"

Here she opened her eyes and met those of Sir Francis, who was eagerly bending over her. She

uttered an exclamation of alarm, and strove to rise. He held her still more closely.

"Thelma—dear, dearest Thelma! Let me comfort you,—let me tell you how much I love you!"

And before she could divine his intent, he pressed his lips passionately on her pale cheek. With a cry she tore herself violently from his arms and sprang to her feet, trembling in every limb.

"What—what is this?" she exclaimed wrathfully. "Are you mad?"

And still weak and confused from her recent attack of faintness, she pushed back her hair from her brows and regarded him with a sort of puzzled horror.

He flushed deeply, and set his lips hard.

"I dare say I am," he answered, with a bitter laugh; "in fact, I know I am! You see, I've betrayed my miserable secret. Will you forgive me, Lady Errington—Thelma?" He drew nearer to her, and his eyes darkened with restrained passion. "Matchless beauty!—adorable woman, as you are!—will you not pardon my crime, if crime it be—the crime of loving you? For I do love you!—Heaven only knows how utterly and desperately!"

She stood mute, white, almost rigid, with that strange look of horror frozen, as it were, upon her features. Emboldened by her silence, he

approached and caught her hand,—she wrenched it from his grasp and motioned him from her with a gesture of such royal contempt that he quailed before her. All suddenly the flood-gates of her speech were loosened,—the rising tide of burning indignation that in its very force had held her dumb and motionless, now broke forth unrestrainedly.

“O God!” she cried impetuously, a magnificent glory of disdain flashing in her jewel-like eyes, “what *thing* is this that calls itself a man?—this thief of honour,—this pretended friend? What have I done, sir, that you should put such deep disgrace as your so-called *love* upon me?—what have I *seemed*, that you thus dare to outrage me by the pollution of your touch? I,—the wife of the noblest gentleman in the land! Ah!” and she drew a long breath—“and it is you who speak against my husband—*you!*” She smiled scornfully,—then with more calmness continued—“You will leave my house, sir, at once! . . . and never presume to enter it again!”

And she stepped towards the bell. He looked at her with an evil leer.

“Stop a moment!” he said coolly. “Just one moment before you ring. Pray consider! The servant cannot possibly enter, as the door is locked.”

“You *dared* to lock the door!” she exclaimed, a sudden fear chilling her heart as she remembered

similar mauœuvres on the part of the Reverend Mr. Dyceworthy—then another thought crossed her mind, and she began to retreat towards a large painted panel of “Venus”disporting among cupids and dolphins in the sea. Sir Francis sprang to her side, and caught her arm in an iron grip—his face was aflame with baffled spite and vindictiveness.

“Yes, I *dared*!” he muttered with triumphant malice. “And I dared do more than that! You lay unconscious in my arms,—you beautiful, bewitching Thelma, and I kissed you—ay! fifty times! You can never undo those kisses! You can never forget that *my* lips, as well as your husband’s, have rested on yours—I have had that much joy that shall never be taken away from me! And if I choose, even now,”—and he gripped her more closely—“yes, even now I will kiss you, in spite of you!—who is to prevent me? I will force you to love me, Thelma——”

Driven to bay, she struck him with all her force in the face, across the eyes.

“Traitor! — liar! — coward!” she gasped breathlessly. “Let me go!”

Smarting with the pain of the blow, he unconsciously loosened his grasp—she rushed to the “Venus” panel, and to his utter discomfiture and amazement he saw it open and close behind her. She disappeared suddenly and noiselessly as if by magic. With a fierce exclamation, he threw his

whole weight against that secret sliding door—it resisted all his efforts. He searched for the spring by which it must have opened,—the whole panel was perfectly smooth and apparently solid, and the painted “Venus” reclining on her dolphin’s back seemed as though she smiled mockingly at his rage and disappointment.

While he was examining it, he heard the sudden, sharp, and continuous ringing of an electric bell somewhere in the house, and with a guilty flush on his face he sprang to the drawing-room door and unlocked it. He was just in time, for scarcely had he turned the key, when Morris made his appearance. That venerable servitor looked round the room in evident surprise.

“Did her ladyship ring?” he inquired, his eyes roving everywhere in search of his mistress. Sir Francis collected his wits, and forced himself to seem composed.

“No,” he said coolly. “*I* rang.” He adopted this falsehood as a means of exit. “Call a hansom, will you?”

And he sauntered easily into the hall, and got on his hat and great-coat. Morris was rather bewildered,—but, obedient to the command, blew the summoning cab-whistle, which was promptly answered. Sir Francis tossed him half a crown, and entered the vehicle, which clattered away with him in the direction of Cromwell Road. Stopping at a particular house in a side street leading from

thence, he bade the cabman wait,—and, ascending the steps, busied himself for some moments in scribbling something rapidly in pencil on a leaf of his note-book by the light of the hanging-lamp in the doorway. He then gave a loud knock, and inquired of the servant who answered it—

“Is Mr. Snawley-Grubbs in?”

“Yes, sir,”—the reply came rather hesitatingly—“but he’s having a party to-night.”

And, in fact, the scraping of violins and the shuffle of dancing feet were distinctly audible overhead.

“Oh, well, just mention my name—Sir Francis Lennox. Say I will not detain him more than five minutes.”

He entered, and was ushered into a small ante-room while the maid went to deliver her message. He caught sight of his own reflection in a round mirror over the mantel-piece, and his face darkened as he saw a dull red ridge across his forehead—the mark of Thelma’s well-directed blow,—the sign-manual of her scorn. A few minutes passed, and then there came in to him a large man in an expansive dress-suit,—a man with a puffy, red, Silenus-like countenance—no other than Mr. Snawley-Grubbs, who hailed him with effusive cordiality.

“My dear Sir Francis!” he said in a rich, thick, comfortable voice. “This is an unexpected pleasure! Won’t you come upstairs? My girls

are having a little informal dance—just among themselves and their own young friends—quite simple,—in fact an unpretentious little affair!” And he rubbed his fat hands, on which twinkled two or three large diamond rings. “But we shall be charmed if you will join us!”

“Thanks, not this evening,” returned Sir Francis. “It’s rather too late. I should not have intruded upon you at this hour—but I thought you might possibly like this paragraph for the *Snake*.”

And he held out with a careless air the paper on which he had scribbled but a few minutes previously. Mr. Snawley-Grubbs smiled,—and fixed a pair of elegant gold-rimmed eye-glasses on his inflamed crimson nose.

“I must tell you, though,” he observed, before reading, “that it is too late for this week, at any rate. We’ve gone to press already.”

“Never mind!” returned Sir Francis indifferently. “Next week will do as well.”

And he furtively watched Mr. Snawley-Grubbs while he perused the pencilled scrawl,—that gentleman, however, as Editor and Proprietor of the *Snake*—a new, but highly successful weekly “society” journal, was far too dignified and self-important to allow his countenance to betray his feelings. He merely remarked, as he folded up the little slip very carefully,

“Very smart! very smart, indeed! Authentic, of course?”

Sir Francis drew himself up haughtily. "You doubt my word?"

"Oh dear, no!" declared Mr. Snawley-Grubbs hastily, venturing to lay a soothing hand on Sir Francis's shoulder. "Your position, and all that sort of thing—— Naturally you *must* be able to secure correct information. You can't help it! I assure you, the *Snake* is infinitely obliged to you for a great many well-written and socially exciting paragraphs. Only, you see, I myself should never have thought that so extreme a follower of the exploded old doctrine of *noblesse oblige*, as Sir Philip Bruce-Errington, would have started on such a new line of action at all. But, of course, we are all mortal!" And he shook his round, thick head with leering sagacity. "Well!" he continued after a pause. "This shall go in without fail next week, I promise you."

"You can send me a hundred copies of the issue," said Sir Francis, taking up his hat to go. "I suppose you're not afraid of an action for libel?"

Mr. Snawley-Grubbs laughed—nay, he roared,—the idea seemed so exquisitely suited to his sense of humour.

"Afraid? My dear fellow, there's nothing I should like better! It would establish the *Snake*, and make my fortune! I would even go to prison with pleasure. Prison, for a first-class misdemeanant, as I should most probably be termed, is

perfectly endurable." He laughed again, and escorted Sir Francis to the street-door, where he shook hands heartily. "You are sure you won't come upstairs and join us? No? Ah, I see you have a cab waiting. Good night, good night!"

And the Snawley-Grubbs door being closed upon him, Sir Francis re-entered his cab, and was driven straight to his bachelor lodgings in Piccadilly. He was in a better humour with himself now,—though he was still angrily conscious of a smart throbbing across the eyes, where Thelma's ringed hand had struck him. He found a brief note from Lady Winsleigh awaiting him. It ran as follows:—

"You're playing a losing game this time,—she will believe nothing without proofs—and even then it will be difficult. You had better drop the pursuit, I fancy—for once a woman's reputation will escape you!"

He smiled bitterly as he read these last words.

"Not while a society paper exists!" he said to himself. "As long as there are editors willing to accept the word of a responsible man of position, for any report, the chastest Diana that ever lived shall not escape calumny! She wants proofs, does she? She shall have them—by Jove! she shall!"

And instead of going to bed, he went off to a bijou villa in St. John's Wood,—an elegantly appointed little place, which he rented and main-

tained,—and where the popular personage known as Violet Vere, basked in the very lap of luxury.

Meanwhile, Thelma paced up and down her own boudoir, into which she had escaped through the sliding panel which had baffled her admirer. Her whole frame trembled as she thought of the indignity to which she had been subjected during her brief unconsciousness,—her face burned with bitter shame,—she felt as if she were somehow poisonously infected by those hateful kisses of Lennox,—all her womanly and wifely instincts were outraged. Her first impulse was to tell her husband everything the instant he returned. It was she who had rung the bell which had startled Sir Francis, and she was surprised that her summons was not answered. She rang again, and Britta appeared.

“I wanted Morris,” said Thelma quickly.

“He thought it was the drawing-room bell,” responded Britta meekly, for her “Fröken” looked very angry. “I saw him in the hall just now, letting out Sir Francis Lennox.”

“Has he gone?” demanded Thelma eagerly.

Britta’s wonder increased. “Yes, Fröken!”

Thelma caught her arm. “Tell Morris never, never to let him inside the house again—*never!*” and her blue eyes flashed wrathfully. “He is a wicked man, Britta! You do not know how wicked he is!”

“Oh yes, I do!” and Britta regarded her

mistress very steadfastly. "I know quite well! But, then, I must not speak! If I dared, I could tell you some strange things, dear Fröken—but you will not hear me. You know you do not wish me to talk about your grand new friends, Fröken, but——" she paused timidly.

"Oh, Britta, dear!" said Thelma affectionately taking her hand. "You know they are not so much my friends as the friends of Sir Philip,—and for this reason I must never listen to anything against them. Do you not see? Of course their ways seem strange to us—but, then, life in London is so different to life in Norway,—and we cannot all at once understand——" she broke off, sighing a little. Then she resumed—"Now you will give Morris my message, Britta—and then come to me in my bedroom—I am tired, and Philip said I was not to wait up for him."

Britta departed, and Thelma went rather slowly upstairs. It was now nearly midnight, and she felt languid and weary. Her reflections began to take a new turn. Suppose she told her husband all that had occurred, he would most certainly go to Sir Francis and punish him in some way—there might then be a quarrel in which Philip himself might suffer—and all sorts of evil consequences would perhaps result from her want of reticence. If, on the other hand, she said nothing, and simply refused to receive Lennox, would not her husband think such conduct on her

part strange? She puzzled over these questions till her head ached—and finally resolved to keep her own counsel for the present,—after what had happened, Sir Francis would most probably not intrude himself again into her presence. “I will ask Mrs. Lorimer what is best to do,” she thought. “She is old and wise, and she will know.”

That night, as she laid her head on her pillow, and Britta threw the warm *eidredon* over her, she shivered a little and asked—

“Is it not very cold, Britta?”

“Very!” responded her little maid. “And it is beginning to snow.”

Thelma looked wistful. “It is all snow and darkness now at the Altenfjord,” she said.

Britta smiled. “Yes, indeed, Fröken! We are better off here than there.”

“Perhaps!” replied Thelma a little musingly, and then she settled herself as though to sleep.

Britta kissed her hand, and retired noiselessly. When she had gone, Thelma opened her eyes and lay broad awake looking at the flicker of rosy light flung on the ceiling from the little suspended lamp in her oratory. All snow and darkness at the Altenfjord! How strange the picture seemed! She thought of her mother’s sepulchre,—how cold and dreary it must be,—she could see in fancy the long pendent icicles fringing the entrance to the sea-king’s tomb,—the spot where she and Philip had first met,—she could almost hear the slow,

sullen plash of the black Fjord against the shore. Her maiden life in Norway—her school-days at Arles,—these were now like dreams,—dreams that had passed away long, long ago. The whole tenor of her existence had changed,—she was a wife,—she was soon to be a mother,—and with this near future of new and sacred joy before her, why did she to-night, so persistently look backward to the past?

As she lay quiet, watching the glimmering light upon the wall, it seemed as though her room were suddenly filled with shadowy forms,—she saw her mother's sweet, sad, suffering face,—then her father's sturdy figure and fine, frank features,—then came the flitting shape of the hapless Sigurd, whose plaintive voice she almost imagined she could hear,—and feeling that she was growing foolishly nervous, she closed her eyes, and tried to sleep. In vain,—her mind began to work on a far more unpleasing train of thought. Why did not Philip return? Where was he? As though some mocking devil had answered her, the words, "In the arms of Violet Vere!" as uttered by Sir Francis Lennox, recurred to her. Overcome by her restlessness, she started up,—she determined to get out of bed, and put on her dressing-gown and read,—when her quick ears caught the sound of steps coming up the staircase. She recognized her husband's firm tread, and understood that he was followed by

Neville, whose sleeping-apartment was on the floor above. She listened attentively—they were talking together in low tones on the landing outside her door.

“I think it would be much better to make a clean breast of it,” said Sir Philip. “She will have to know some day.”

“Your wife? For God’s sake, don’t tell her!” Neville’s voice replied. “Such a disgraceful——” Here his words sank to a whisper, and Thelma could not distinguish them. Another minute, and her husband entered with soft precaution, fearing to awake her—she stretched out her arms to welcome him, and he hastened to her with an exclamation of tenderness and pleasure.

“My darling! Not asleep yet?”

She smiled,—but there was something very piteous in her smile, had the dim light enabled him to perceive it.

“No, not yet, Philip! And yet I think I have been dreaming of—the Altenfjord.”

“Ah! it must be cold there now,” he answered lightly. “It’s cold enough here, in all conscience. To-night there is a bitter east wind, and snow is falling.”

She heard this account of the weather with almost morbid interest. Her thoughts instantly betook themselves again to Norway, and dwelt there. To the last,—before her aching eyes closed in the slumber she so sorely needed,—she seemed

to be carried away in fancy to a weird stretch of gloom-enveloped landscape where she stood entirely alone, vaguely wondering at the dreary scene. "How strange it seems!" she murmured almost aloud. "All snow and darkness at the Altenfjord!"

CHAPTER VIII.

“Le temps où nous nous sommes aimés n’a guère duré, jeune fille ; il a passé comme un coup de vent !”

Old Breton Ballad.

THE next morning dawned, cold and dismal. A dense yellow fog hung over the metropolis like a pall—the street-lamps were lighted, but their flare scarcely illumined the thoroughfares, and the chill of the snow-burdened air penetrated into the warmest rooms, and made itself felt even by the side of the brightest fires. Sir Philip woke with an uncomfortable sense of headache and depression, and grumbled,—as surely every Englishman has a right to grumble, at the uncompromising wretchedness of his country’s winter climate. His humour was not improved when a telegram arrived before breakfast, summoning him in haste to a dull town in one of the Midland counties, on pressing business connected with his candidature for Parliament.

“What a bore !” he exclaimed, showing the missive to his wife. “I *must* go,—and I shan’t

be able to get back to-night. You'll be all alone, Thelma. I wish you'd go to the Winsleighs!"

"Why?" said Thelma quietly. "I shall much prefer to be here. I do not mind, Philip. I am accustomed to be alone."

Something in her tone struck him as particularly sad, and he looked at her intently.

"Now, my darling," he said suddenly, "If this Parliamentary bother is making you feel worried or vexed in any way, I'll throw it all up—by Jove, I will!" And he drew her into his warm embrace. "After all," he added, with a laugh, "what does it matter! The country can get on without me!"

Thelma smiled a little.

"You must not talk so foolishly, Philip," she said tenderly. "It is wrong to begin a thing of importance, and not go through with it. And I am not worried or vexed at all. What would people say of me if I, your wife, were, for my own selfish comfort and pleasure of having you always with me, to prevent you from taking a good place among the men of your nation? Indeed, I should deserve much blame! And so, though it is a gloomy day for you, poor boy,—you must go to this place where you are wanted, and I shall think of you all the time you are gone, and shall be so happy to welcome you home to-morrow!"

And she kissed and clung to him for a moment

in silence. All that day Philip was haunted by the remembrance of the lingering tenderness of her farewell embrace. By ten o'clock he was gone, taking Neville with him; and after her household duties were over, Thelma prepared herself to go and lunch with old Mrs. Lorimer, and see what she would advise concerning the affair of Sir Francis Lennox. But, at the same time, she resolved that nothing should make her speak of the reports that were afloat about her husband and Violet Vere.

"I know it is all false," she said to herself over and over again. "And the people here are as silly as the peasants in Bosekop, ready to believe any untruth so long as it gives them something to talk about. But they may chatter as they please—I shall not say one word, not even to Philip—for it would seem as if I mistrusted him."

Thus she put away all the morbid fancies that threatened to oppress her, and became almost cheerful.

And while she made her simple plans for pleasantly passing the long, dull day of her husband's enforced absence, her friend, Lady Winsleigh, was making arrangements of a very different nature. Her ladyship had received a telegram from Sir Francis Lennox that morning. The pink missive had apparently put her in an excellent humour, though, after reading it, she crumpled it up and threw it in the waste-paper

basket, from which receptacle, Louise Rénaud, her astute attendant, half an hour later extracted it, secreting it in her own pocket for private perusal at leisure. She ordered her brougham, saying she was going out on business,—and before departing, she took from her dressing-case certain bank-notes and crammed them hastily into her purse—a purse which, in all good faith, she handed to her maid to put in her sealskin muff-bag. Of course, Louise managed to make herself aware of its contents,—but when her ladyship at last entered her carriage her unexpected order, “To the Brilliant Theatre, Strand,” was sufficient to startle Briggs, and cause him to exchange surprise signals with “Mamzelle,” who merely smiled a prim, incomprehensible smile.

“*Where* did your la’ship say?” asked Briggs dubiously.

“Are you getting deaf, Briggs?” responded his mistress pleasantly. “To the Brilliant Theatre!” She raised her voice, and spoke with distinct emphasis. There was no mistaking her. Briggs touched his hat,—in the same instant he winked at Louise, and then the carriage rolled away.

At night, the Brilliant Theatre is a pretty little place,—comfortable, cosy, bright, and deserving of its name;—in broad day, it is none of these things. A squalid dreariness seems to have settled upon it—it has a peculiar atmosphere of its own—

an atmosphere dark, heavy, and strangely flavoured with odours of escaping gas and crushed orange-peel. Behind the scenes these odours mingle with a chronic, all-pervading smell of beer—beer, which the stranger's sensitive nose detects directly, in spite of the choking clouds of dust which arise from the boards at the smallest movement of any part of the painted scenery. The Brilliant had gone through much ill-fortune—its proprietors never realized any financial profit till they secured Violet Vere. With her came prosperity. Her utter absence of all reserve—the frankness with which she threw modesty to the winds,—the vigour with which she danced a regular “break-down,”—roaring a comic song of the lowest type, by way of accompaniment,—the energetic manner in which, metaphorically speaking, she kicked at the public with her shapely legs,—all this overflow of genius on her part drew crowds to the Brilliant nightly, and the grateful and happy managers paid her a handsome salary, humoured all her caprices, and stinted and snubbed for her sake, all the rest of the company. She was immensely popular—the “golden youth” of London raved about her dyed hair, painted eyes, and carmined lips—even her voice, as coarse as that of a dustman, was applauded to the echo, and her dancing excited the wildest enthusiasm. Dukes sent her presents of diamond ornaments—gifts of value which they would have possibly refused to their own wives and daughters,

—Royal Highnesses thought it no shame to be seen lounging near her stage dressing-room door, —in short, she was in the zenith of her career, and, being thoroughly unprincipled, audaciously insolent, and wholly without a conscience,—she enjoyed herself immensely.

At the very time when Lady Winsleigh's carriage was nearing the Strand, the grand morning rehearsal of a new burlesque was "on" at the Brilliant—and Violet's harsh tones, raised to a sort of rough masculine roar, were heard all over the theatre, as she issued commands or made complaints according to her changeful humours. She sat in an elevated position above the stage on a jutting beam of wood painted to resemble the gnarled branch of a tree,—swinging her legs to and fro and clicking the heels of her shoes together in time to the mild scraping of a violin, the player whereof was "trying over" the first few bars of the new "jig" in which she was ere long to distinguish herself. She was a handsome woman, with a fine, fair skin, and large, full, dark eyes—she had a wide mouth, which, nearly always on the grin, displayed to the full her strong white teeth,—her figure was inclined to excessive *embonpoint*, but this rather endeared her to her admirers than otherwise,—many of these gentlemen being prone to describe her fleshly charms by the epithet "Prime!" as though she were a fatting pig or other animal getting ready for killing.

“Tommy! Tommy!” she screeched presently. “Are you going to sleep? Do you expect me to dance to a dirge, you lazy devil!”

Tommy, the player of the violin, paused in his efforts, and looked up drearily. He was an old man, with a lean, long body and pinched features—his lips had a curious way, too, of trembling when he spoke, as if he were ready to cry.

“I can’t help it,” he said slowly. “I don’t know it yet. I must practise it a bit at home. My sight’s not so good as it used to be——”

“Such a pair of optics, love, you’ve never, never seen—
One my mother blacked last night, the tother it is green!”

sang Violet, to the infinite delight of all the unwashed-looking supernumeraries and ballet-girls who were scattered about the stage, talking and laughing.

“Shut up, Tommy!” she continued. “You’re always talking about your eyesight. I warn you, if you say too much about it you’ll lose your place. We don’t want blind fiddlers in the Brilliant. Put down your catgut screamer, and fetch me a pint. Ask for the Vere’s own tipples—they’ll twig!”

Tommy obeyed, and shuffled off on his errand. As he departed,—a little man with a very red face, wearing a stove-pipe hat very much on one side, bounced on the stage as if some one had thrown him there like a ball.

“Now, ladies, ladies!” he shouted warningly.

“Attention! Once again, please! The last figure once again!” The straggling groups scrambled hastily into something like order, and the little man continued—“One, two, three! Advance—retreat—left, right! Very well, indeed! Arms up a little more, Miss Jenkins—so! toes well pointed—curtsy—retire! One, two, three! swift slide to the left wing—forward! Round—take hands—all smile, please!” This general smile was apparently not quite satisfactory, for he repeated persuasively—“All smile, please! So! Round again—more quickly—now break the circle in centre—enter Miss Vere——” he paused, growing still redder in the face, and demanded, “Where is Miss Vere?”

He was standing just beneath the painted bough of the sham tree, and in one second his hat was dexterously kicked off, and two heels met with a click round his neck.

“Here I am, pickaninny!” retorted Miss Vere, holding him fast in this novel embrace amid the laughter of the supers. “You’re getting as blind as Tommy! Steady, steady now, donkey!—steady—woa!” And in a trice she stood upright, one foot planted firmly on each of his shoulders.

“No weight, am I, darling?” she went on jeeringly, and with an inimitably derisive air she put up an eye-glass and surveyed the top of his head. “You want a wig, my dear—you do, indeed! Come with me to-morrow, and I’ll buy

you one to suit your complexion. Your wife won't know you!"

And with a vigorous jump she sprang down from her position, managing to give him a smart hit on the nose as she did so—and leaping to the centre of the stage, she posed herself to commence her dance—when Tommy came creeping back in his slow and dismal fashion, bearing something in a pewter pot.

"That's the ticket!" she cried as she perceived him. "I'm as dry as a whole desert! Give it here!" And she snatched the mug from the feeble hand of her messenger and began drinking eagerly.

The little red-faced man interposed. "Now, Miss Vi," he said, "is that brandy?"

"Rather so!" returned the Vere, with a knowing wink, "and a good many things besides. It's a mixture. The 'Vere's Own!' Ha, ha! Might be the name of a regiment!"

And she buried her mouth and nose again in the tankard.

"Look here," said the little man again. "Why not wait till after the dance? It's bad for you before."

"Oh, is it, indeed!" screamed Violet, raising her face, which became suddenly and violently flushed. "O good Lord! Are you a temperance preacher? Teach your granny! Bad for me? Say another word, and I'll box your ears for you!"

You braying jackass!—you snivelling idiot! Who makes the Brilliant draw? You or I? Tell me that, you staring old——”

Here Tommy, who had for some minutes been vainly endeavouring to attract her attention, raised his weak voice to a feeble shout.

“I say, Miss Vere! I’ve been trying to tell you, but you won’t listen! There’s a lady waiting to see you!”

“A what?” she asked.

“A lady!” continued Tommy, in loud tones. “A lady of *title*! Wants to see you in private! Won’t detain you long!”

Violet Vere raised her pewter mug once more, and drained off its contents.

“Lord, ain’t I honoured!” she said, smacking her lips with a grin. “A lady of title to see me! Let her wait! Now then!” and snapping her fingers, she began her dance, and went through it to the end, with her usual vigour and frankness. When she had finished, she turned to the red-faced man who had watched her evolutions with much delight in spite of the abuse she had heaped upon him, and said with an affected, smirking drawl—

“Show the lady of title into my dressing-room! I shall be ready for her in ten minutes. Be sure to mention that I am very shy,—and unaccustomed to company!”

And, giggling gently like an awkward school-girl, she held down her head with feigned bashful-

ness, and stepped mincingly across the stage with such a ludicrous air of prim propriety that all her associates burst out laughing and applauded her vociferously. She turned and curtsied to them demurely—then suddenly raising one leg in a horizontal position, she twirled it rapidly in their faces,—then she gave a little shocked cough behind her hand, grinned, and vanished.

When, in the stipulated ten minutes, she was ready to receive her unknown visitor, she was quite transformed. She had arrayed herself in a trailing gown of rich black velvet, fastened at the side with jet clasps—a cluster of natural, innocent, white violets nestled in the fall of Spanish lace at her throat—her face was pale with pearl-powder,—and she had eaten a couple of scented bon-bons to drown the smell of her recent brandy-tipple. She reclined gracefully in an easy chair, pretending to read, and she rose with an admirably acted air of startled surprise, as one of the errand boys belonging to the Brilliant tapped at her door, and in answer to her “Come in!” announced, “Lady Winsleigh!”

A faint, sweet, questioning smile played on the Vere’s wide mouth.

“I am not aware that I have the honour of——” she began, modulating her voice to the requirements of fashionable society, and wondering within herself “what the d——l” this woman in the silk and sable-fur costume wanted.

Lady Winsleigh in the meantime stared at her with cold, critical eyes.

"She is positively rather handsome," she thought. "I can quite imagine a certain class of men losing their heads about her." Aloud she said—

"I must apologize for this intrusion, Miss Vere! I dare say you have never heard my name—I am not fortunate enough to be famous,—as *you* are." This with a killing satire in her smile. "May I sit down? Thanks! I have called upon you in the hope that you may perhaps be able to give me a little information in a private matter—a matter concerning the happiness of a very dear friend of mine." She paused—Violet Vere sat silent. After a minute or two, her ladyship continued in a somewhat embarrassed manner—

"I believe you know a gentleman with whom I am also acquainted—Sir Philip Bruce-Errington."

Miss Vere raised her eyes with charming languor and a slow smile.

"Oh yes!"

"He visits you, doesn't he?"

"Frequently!"

"I'm afraid you'll think me rude and inquisitive," continued Lady Winsleigh, with a coaxing air, "but—but may I ask——"

"Anything in the world," interrupted Violet coolly. "Ask away! But I'm not bound to answer."

Lady Winsleigh reddened with indignation. "What an insulting creature!" she thought. But, after all, she had put herself in her present position, and she could not very well complain if she met with a rebuff. She made another effort.

"Sir Francis Lennox told me——" she began.

The Vere interrupted her with a cheerful laugh.

"Oh, you come from him, do you? Now, why didn't you tell me that at first? It's all right! You're a great friend of Lennie's, aren't you?"

Lady Winsleigh sat erect and haughty, a deadly chill of disgust and fear at her heart. This creature called her quondam lover, "Lennie"—even as she herself had done,—and she, the proud, vain woman of society and fashion shuddered at the idea that there should be even this similarity between herself and the "thing" called Violet Vere. She replied stiffly—

"I have known him a long time."

"He's a nice fellow," went on Miss Vere easily—"a *leetle* stingy sometimes, but never mind that! You want to know about Sir Philip Errington, and I'll tell you. He's chosen to mix himself up with some affairs of mine——"

"What affairs?" asked Lady Winsleigh rather eagerly.

"They don't concern you," returned Miss Vere calmly, "and we needn't talk about them!"

But they concern Sir Philip,—or he thinks they do, and insists on seeing me about them, and holding long conversations, which bore me excessively ! ”

She yawned slightly, smothering her yawn in a dainty lace handkerchief, and then went on—

“ He’s a moral young man, don’t you know—and I never could endure moral men ! I can’t get on with them at all ! ”

“ Then you don’t like him ? ” questioned Lady Winsleigh in rather a disappointed tone.

“ No I don’t ! ” said the Vere candidly. “ He’s not my sort. But, Lord bless you ! I know how he’s getting talked about because he comes here—and serve him right too ! He shouldn’t meddle with my business.” She paused suddenly and drew a letter from her pocket,—laughed and tossed it across the table.

“ You can read that, if you like,” she said indifferently. “ He wrote it, and sent it round to me last night.”

Lady Winsleigh’s eyes glistened eagerly,—she recognized Errington’s bold, clear hand at once,—and as she read, an expression of triumph played on her features. She looked up presently and said—

“ Have you any further use for this letter, Miss Vere ? Or—will you allow me to keep it ? ”

The Vere seemed slightly suspicious of this proposal, but looked amused too.

“Why, what do you want it for?” she inquired bluntly. “To teaze him about me?”

Lady Winsleigh forced a smile. “Well—perhaps!” she admitted; then with an air of gentleness and simplicity she continued, “I think, Miss Vere, with you, that it is very wrong of Sir Philip,—very absurd of him, in fact—to interfere with your affairs, whatever they may be,—and as it is very likely annoying to you——”

“It *is*,” interposed Violet decidedly.

“Then, with the help of this letter—which, really—really—excuse me for saying it!—quite compromises him,” and her ladyship looked amiably concerned about it, “I might perhaps persuade him not to—to—intrude upon you—you understand? But if you object to part with the letter, never mind! If I did not fear to offend you, I should ask you to exchange it for—for something more—well! let us say, something more substantial——”

“Don’t beat about the bush!” said Violet, with a sudden oblivion of her company manners. “You mean money?”

Lady Winsleigh smiled. “As you put it so frankly, Miss Vere——” she began.

“Of course! I’m always frank,” returned the Vere, with a loud laugh. “Besides, what’s the good of pretending? Money’s the only thing worth having—it pays your butcher, baker, and dress-maker—and how are you to get along if you *can’t* pay them, I’d like to know! Lord! if all the

letters I've got from fools were paying stock instead of waste-paper, I'd shut up shop and leave the Brilliant to look out for itself!"

Lady Winsleigh felt she had gained her object, and she could now afford to be gracious.

"That would be a great loss to the world," she remarked sweetly. "An immense loss! London could scarcely get on without Violet Vere!" Here she opened her purse and took out some bank-notes, which she folded and slipped inside an envelope. "Then I may have the letter?" she continued.

"You may and welcome!" returned Violet.

Lady Winsleigh instantly held out the envelope, which she as instantly clutched. "Especially if you'll tell Sir Philip Errington to mind his own business!" She paused, and a dark flush mounted to her brow—one of those sudden flushes that purpled rather than crimsoned her face. "Yes," she repeated, "as he's a friend of yours, just tell him I said he was to mind his own business! Lord! what does he want to come here and preach at me for! I don't want his sermons! Moral!" here she laughed rather hoarsely, "I'm as moral as any one on the stage! Who says I'm not! Take 'em all round—there's not a soul behind the foot-lights more open and above-board than I am!"

And her eyes flashed defiantly.

"She's been drinking!" thought Lady Winsleigh disgustedly. In fact, the "Vere's Own" tippie

had begun to take its usual effect, which was to make the Vere herself both blatant and boisterous.

"I'm sure," said her ladyship with frigid politeness, "that you are everything that is quite charming, Miss Vere! I have a great respect for the—the ornaments of the English stage. Society has quite thrown down its former barriers, you know!—the members of your profession are received in the very best circles——"

"I ain't!" said Violet, with ungrammatical candour. "Your Irvings and your Terrys, your Mary Andersons and your Langtrys,—they're good enough for your fine drawing-rooms, and get more invitations out than they can accept. And none of them have got half my talent, I tell you! Lord bless my soul! if they're respectable enough for you,—so am I!"

And she struck her hand emphatically on the table. Lady Winsleigh looked at her with a slight smile.

"I must really say good-bye!" she said, rising and gathering her furs about her. "I could talk with you all the morning, Miss Vere, but I have so many engagements! Besides I mustn't detain *you*! I'm so much obliged to you for your kind reception of me!"

"Don't mention it!" and Violet glanced her over with a kind of sullen sarcasm. "I'm bound to please Lennie when I can, you know!"

Again Lady Winsleigh shivered a little, but

forced herself to shake hands with the notorious stage-Jezebel.

"I shall come and see you in the new piece," she said graciously. "I always take a box on first nights! And your dancing is so exquisite! The very poetry of motion! So pleased to have met you! Good-bye!"

And with a few more vague compliments and remarks about the weather, Lady Winsleigh took her departure. Left alone, the actress threw herself back in her chair and laughed.

"That woman's up to some mischief," she exclaimed *sotto voce*, "and so is Lennie! I wonder what's their little game? I don't care, as long as they'll keep the high-and-mighty Errington in his place. I'm tired of him! Why does he meddle with *my* affairs?" Her brows knitted into a frown. "As if he or anybody else could persuade me to go back to——," she paused, and bit her lips angrily. Then she opened the envelope Lady Winsleigh had left with her, and pulled out the bank-notes inside. "Let me see—five, ten, fifteen, twenty! Not bad pay, on the whole! It'll just cover the bill for my plush mantle. Hullo! Who's there?"

Some one knocked at her door.

"Come in!" she cried.

The feeble Tommy presented himself. His weak mouth trembled more than ever, and he was apparently conscious of this, for he passed his hand nervously across it two or three times.

“Well, what’s up?” inquired the “star” of the Brilliant, fingering her bank-notes as she spoke.

“Miss Vere,” stammered Tommy, “I venture to ask you a favour,—could you kindly, very kindly lend me ten shillings till to-morrow night? I am so pressed just now—and my wife is ill in bed—and——” he stopped, and his eyes sought her face hopefully, yet timidly.

“You shouldn’t have a wife, Tommy!” averred Violet with blunt frankness. “Wives are expensive articles. Besides, I never lend. I never give—except to public charities where one’s name gets mentioned in the papers. I’m obliged to do that, you know, by way of advertisement. Ten shillings! Why, I can’t afford ten pence! My bills would frighten you, Tommy! There, go along, and don’t cry, for goodness sake! Let your fiddle cry for you!”

“Oh, Miss Vere,” once more pleaded Tommy, “if you knew how my wife suffers——”

The actress rose and stamped her foot impatiently.

“Bother your wife!” she cried angrily, “and you too! Look out! or I’ll tell the manager we’ve got a beggar at the Brilliant. Don’t stare at me like that! Go to the d—I with you!”

Tommy slunk off abashed and trembling, and the Vere began to sing, or rather croak, a low comic song, while she threw over her shoulders a

rich mantle glittering with embroidered trimmings, and poised a coquettish Paris model hat on her thick uptwisted coils of hair. Thus attired, she passed out of her dressing-room, locking the door behind her, and after a brief conversation with the jocose acting manager, whom she met on her way out, she left the theatre, and took a cab to the Criterion, where the young Duke of Moorlands, her latest conquest, had invited her to a sumptuous luncheon with himself and friends, all men of fashion, who were running through what money they had as fast as they could go.

Lady Winsleigh, on her way home, was tormented by sundry uncomfortable thoughts and sharp pricks of conscience. Her interview with Violet Vere had instinctively convinced her that Sir Philip was innocent of the intrigue imputed to him, and yet,—the letter she had now in her possession seemed to prove him guilty. And though she felt herself to be playing a vile part, she could not resist the temptation of trying what the effect would be of this compromising document on Thelma's trusting mind. It was undoubtedly a very incriminating epistle—any lawyer would have said as much, while blandly pocketing his fee for saying it. It was written off in evident haste, and ran as follows:—

“Let me see you once more on the subject you know of. Why will you not accept the honorable position offered to you? There shall be no stint

of money—all the promises I have made I am quite ready to fulfil—you shall lose nothing by being gentle. Surely you cannot continue to seem so destitute of all womanly feeling and pity? I will not believe that you would so deliberately condemn to death a man who has loved, and who loves you still so faithfully, and who, without you, is utterly weary of life and broken-hearted! Think once more—and let my words carry more weight with you!

“BRUCE-ERRINGTON.”

This was all, but more than enough!

“I wonder what he means,” thought Lady Winsleigh. “It looks as if he were in love with the Vere and she refused to reciprocate. It *must* be that. And yet that doesn’t accord with what the creature herself said about his ‘preaching at her.’ He wouldn’t do that if he were in love.”

She studied every word of the letter again and again, and finally folded it up carefully and placed it in her pocket-book.

“Innocent or guilty, Thelma must see it,” she decided. “I wonder how she’ll take it! If she wants a proof—it’s one she’ll scarcely deny. Some women would fret themselves to death over it—but I shouldn’t wonder if she sat down under it quite calmly without a word of complaint.” She frowned a little. “Why must *she* always be

superior to others of her sex ! How I detest that still solemn smile of hers and those big baby-blue eyes ! I think if Philip had married any other woman than she—a woman more like the rest of us who'd have gone with her time,—I could have forgiven him more easily. But to pick up a Norwegian peasant and set her up as a sort of moral finger-post to society—and then to go and compromise himself with Violet Vere—that's a kind of thing I *can't* stand ! I'd rather be anything in the world than a humbug ! ”

Many people desire to be something they are not, and her ladyship quite unconsciously echoed this rather general sentiment. She was, without knowing it, such an adept in society humbug, that she even humbugged herself. She betrayed herself as she betrayed others, and told little soothing lies to her own conscience as she told them to her friends. There are plenty of women like her,—women of pleasant courtesy and fashion, to whom truth is mere coarseness,—and with whom polite lying passes for perfect breeding. She was not aware, as she was driven along Park Lane to her own residence, that she carried with her on the box of her brougham, a private detective in the person of Briggs. Perched stiffly on his seat, with arms tightly folded, this respectable retainer was quite absorbed in meditation, so much so that he exchanged not a word with his friend, the coachman beside him. He had his own notions of pro-

priety,—he considered that his mistress had no business whatever to call on an actress of Violet Vere's repute,—and he resolved that whether he were reproved for over-officiousness or not, nothing should prevent him from casually mentioning to Lord Winsleigh the object of her ladyship's drive that morning.

“For,” mused Briggs gravely, “a lady 'as responsibilities, and 'owever she forgets 'erself, appearances 'as to be kep' up.”

With the afternoon, the fog which had hung over the city all day, deepened and darkened. Thelma had lunched with Mrs. Lorimer, and had enjoyed much pleasant chat with that kindly, cheerful old lady. She had confided to her, part of the story of Sir Francis Lennox's conduct, carefully avoiding every mention of the circumstance which had given rise to it,—namely, the discussion about Violet Vere. She merely explained that she had suddenly fainted, in which condition Sir Francis had taken advantage of her helplessness to insult her.

Mrs. Lorimer was highly indignant. “Tell your husband all about it, my dear!” she advised. “He's big enough, and strong enough, to give that little snob a good trouncing! My patience! I wish George were in London—he'd lend a hand and welcome!”

And the old lady nodded her head violently over the sock she was knitting,—the making of

socks for her beloved son was her principal occupation and amusement.

“But I hear,” said Thelma, “that it is against the law to strike any one, no matter how you have been insulted. If so,—then Philip would be punished for attacking Sir Francis, and that would not be fair.”

“You didn’t think of that, child, when you struck Lennox yourself,” returned Mrs. Lorimer, laughing. “And I guarantee you gave him a good hard blow,—and serve him right! Never mind what comes of it, my dearie—just tell your husband as soon as ever he comes home, and let him take the matter into his own hands. He’s a fine man—he’ll know how to defend the pretty wife he loves so well!” And she smiled, while her shining knitting-needles clicked faster than ever.

Thelma’s face saddened a little. “I think I am not worthy of his love,” she said sorrowfully.

Mrs. Lorimer looked at her with some inquisitiveness.

“What makes you say that, my dear?”

“Because I feel it so much,” she replied. “Dear Mrs. Lorimer, you cannot, perhaps, understand—but when he married me, it seemed as if the old story of the king and the beggar-maid were being repeated over again. I sought nothing but his love—his love was, and is my life! These riches—these jewels and beautiful things he surrounds me with—I do not care for them at all,

except for the reason that he wishes me to have them. I scarcely understand their value, for I have been poor all my life, and yet I have wanted nothing. I do not think wealth is needful to make one happy. But love—ah! I could not live without it—and now—now——” She paused, and her eyes filled with sudden tears.

“Now what?” asked Mrs. Lorimer gently.

“Now,” continued the girl in a low voice, “my heart is always afraid! Yes! I am afraid of losing my husband’s love. Ah, do not laugh at me, dear Mrs. Lorimer! You know people who are much together sometimes get tired,—tired of seeing the same face always,—the same form——”

“Are *you* tired, dearie?” asked the old lady meaningly.

“I? Tired of Philip? I am only happy when he is with me!” And her eyes deepened with passionate tenderness. “I would wish to live and die beside him, and I should not care if I never saw another human face than his!”

“Well, and don’t you think he has the same feelings for you?”

“Men are different, I think,” returned Thelma musingly. “Now, love is everything to me—but it may not be everything to Philip. I do believe that love is only part of a man’s life, while it is *all* a woman’s. Clara told me once that most husbands wearied of their wives, though they would not always confess it——”

“Clara Winsleigh’s modern social doctrines are false, my dear!” interrupted Mrs. Lorimer quickly. “She isn’t satisfied with her own marriage, and she thinks everybody must be as discontented as herself. Now, my husband and I lived always together for five and twenty years,—and we were lovers to the last day, when my darling died with his hand in mine—and—and—if it hadn’t been for my boy,—I should have died too!”

And two bright tears fell glittering on the old lady’s knitting.

Thelma took her hand and kissed it fondly. “I can understand that,” she said softly; “but still,—still I do believe it is difficult to keep love when you have won it! It is, perhaps, easy to win—but I am sure it is hard to keep!”

Mrs. Lorimer looked at her earnestly.

“My dear child, don’t let that frivolous Winsleigh woman put nonsense into your pretty head. You are too sensible to take such a morbid view of things,—and you mustn’t allow your wholesome fresh nature to be contaminated by the petulant, wrong-headed notions that cloud the brains of idle, fashionable, useless women. Believe me, good men don’t tire of their wives—and Sir Philip is a good man. Good wives never weary their husbands—and you are a good wife—and you will be a good, sweet mother. Think of that new delight so soon coming for you,—and leave all the modern, crazy, one-sided notions of human life to the French and

Russian novelists. Tut-tut!" continued the old lady tenderly. "A nice little ladyship you are,—worrying yourself about nothing! Send Philip to me when he comes home—I'll scold him for leaving his bird to mope in her London cage!"

"I do not mope," declared Thelma. "And you must not scold him, please! Poor boy! He is working so very hard, and has so much to attend to. He wants to distinguish himself for— for my sake!"

"That looks very much as if he were tired of you!" laughed Mrs. Lorimer. "Though I dare say you'd like him to stay at home and make love to you all day! Silly girl! You want the world to be a sort of Arcadia, with you as Phyllis, and Sir Philip as Corydon! My dear, we're living in the nineteenth century, and the days of fond shepherds and languishing shepherdesses are past!"

Thelma laughed too, and felt soon ashamed of her depression. The figure of Violet Vere now and then danced before her like a mocking will-o'-the-wisp—but her pride forbade her to mention this,—the actual source of all her vague troubles.

She left Mrs. Lorimer's house, which was near Holland Park, about four o'clock, and as she was passing Church Street, Kensington, she bade her coachman drive up to the Carmelite Church there, familiarly known as the "Carms." She entered the sacred edifice, where the service of Benediction was in progress; and, kneeling down, she listened

to the exquisite strains of the solemn music that pealed through those dim and shadowy aisles, and a sense of the most perfect peace settled soothingly on her soul. Claspings her gentle hands, she prayed with innocent and heartfelt earnestness—not for herself,—never for herself,—but always, always for that dear, most dear one, for whom every beat of her true heart was a fresh vow of undying and devoted affection.

“Dear God!” she whispered, “If I love him too much, forgive me! Thou who art all Love, wilt pardon me this excess of love! Bless my darling always, and teach me how to be more worthy of Thy goodness and his tenderness!”

And when she left the church, she was happier and more light-hearted than she had been for many a long day. She drove home, heedless of the fog and cold, dismal aspect of the weather, and resolved to go and visit Lady Winsleigh in the evening, so that when Philip came back on the morrow, she might be able to tell him that she had amused herself, and had not been lonely.

But when she arrived at her own door, Morris, who opened it, informed her that Lady Winsleigh was waiting in the drawing-room to see her, and had been waiting some time. Thelma hastened thither immediately, and held out her hands joyously to her friend.

“I am so sorry you have had to wait, Clara!” she began, “Why did you not send word and say

you were coming? Philip is away and will not be back to-night, and I have been lunching with Mrs. Lorimer, and—why, what makes you look so grave?”

Lady Winsleigh regarded her fixedly. How radiantly lovely the young wife looked!—her cheeks had never been more delicately rosy, or her eyes more brilliant. The dark fur cloak she wore with its rich sable trimmings, and the little black velvet *toque* that rested on her fair curls, set off the beauty of her clear skin to perfection, and her rival who stood gazing at her with such close scrutiny, envied her more than ever as she was once again reluctantly forced to admit to herself the matchless loveliness of the innocent creature whose happiness she now sought to destroy.

“Do I look grave, Thelma?” she said with a slight smile. “Well, perhaps I’ve a reason for my gravity. And so your husband is away?”

“Yes. He went quite early this morning,—a telegram summoned him and he was obliged to go.” Here she drew up a chair to the fire, and began to loosen her wraps. “Sit down, Clara! I will ring for tea.”

“No, don’t ring,” said Lady Winsleigh. “Not yet! I want to talk to you privately.” She sank languidly on a velvet lounge and looked Thelma straight in the eyes.

“Dear Thelma,” she continued in a sweetly tremulous, compassionate voice. “Can you bear

to hear something very painful and shocking, something that I'm afraid will grieve you very much?"

The colour fled from the girl's fair face—her eyes grew startled.

"What do you mean, Clara? Is it anything about—about Philip?"

Lady Winsleigh bent her head in assent, but remained silent.

"If," continued Thelma, with a little return of the rosy hue to her cheeks. "If it is something else about that—that person at the theatre, indeed, Clara, I would rather not hear it! I think I have been wrong in listening to any such stories—it is so seldom that gossip of any kind is true. It is not a wife's duty to receive scandals about her husband. And suppose he does see Miss Vere, how do I know that it may not be on business for some friend of his?—because I do know that on that night when he went behind the scenes at the Brilliant, he said it was on business. Mr. Lovelace used often to go and see Miss Mary Anderson, all to persuade her to take a play written by a friend of his—and Philip, who is always kind-hearted, may perhaps be doing something of the same sort. I feel I have been wicked to have even a small doubt of my husband's love,—so, Clara, do not let us talk any more on a subject which only displeases me."

"You must choose your own way of life, of

course," said Lady Winsleigh coldly. "But you draw rather foolish comparisons, Thelma. There is a wide difference between Mary Anderson and Violet Vere. Besides, Mr. Lovelace is a bachelor,—he can do as he likes and go where he likes without exciting comment. However, whether you are angry with me or not, I feel I should not be your true friend if I did not show you—*this*. You know your husband's writing!"

And she drew out the fatal letter, and continued, watching her victim as she spoke, "This was sent by Sir Philip to Violet Vere last night,—she gave it to me herself this morning."

Thelma's hand trembled as she took the paper.

"Why should I read it?" she faltered mechanically.

Lady Winsleigh raised her eyebrows and frowned impatiently.

"Why—why? Because it is your duty to do so! Have you no pride? Will you allow your husband to write such a letter as that to another woman,—and *such* a woman too! without one word of remonstrance? You owe it to yourself—to your own sense of honour—to resent and resist such treatment on his part! Surely the deepest love cannot pardon deliberate injury and insult."

"My love can pardon anything," answered the girl in a low voice, and then slowly, very slowly she opened the folded sheet—slowly she read every word it contained,—words that

stamped themselves one by one on her bewildered brain and sent it reeling into darkness and vacancy. She felt sick and cold—she stared fixedly at her husband's familiar handwriting. "A man who has loved and who loves you still, and who without you is utterly weary and broken-hearted!"

Thus he wrote of himself to—to Violet Vere! It seemed incredible—yet it was true! She heard a rushing sound in her ears—the room swung round dizzily before her eyes—yet she sate, still, calm and cold, holding the letter and speaking no word.

Lady Winsleigh watched her, irritated at her passionless demeanour.

"Well!" she exclaimed at last. "Have you nothing to say?"

Thelma looked up, her eyes burning with an intense feverish light.

"Nothing!" she replied.

"*Nothing?*" repeated her ladyship with emphatic astonishment.

"Nothing against Philip," continued the girl steadily. "For the blame is not his, but mine! That he is weary and broken-hearted must be my fault—though I cannot yet understand what I have done. But it must be something, because if I were all that he wished he would not have grown so tired." She paused and her pale lips quivered. "I am sorry," she went on with

dreamy pathos, "sorrier for him than for myself, because now I see I am in the way of his happiness." A quiver of agony passed over her face,—she fixed her large bright eyes on Lady Winsleigh, who instinctively shrank from the solemn speechless despair of that penetrating gaze.

"Who gave you this letter, Clara?" she asked calmly.

"I told you before,—Miss Vere herself."

"Why did she give it to you?" continued Thelma in a dull sad voice.

Lady Winsleigh hesitated and stammered a little. "Well, because—because I asked her if the stories about Sir Philip were true. And she begged me to ask him not to visit her so often." Then, with an additional thought of malice, she said softly, "She doesn't wish to wrong you, Thelma,—of course, she's not a very good woman, but I think she feels sorry for you!"

The girl uttered a smothered cry of anguish, as though she had been stabbed to the heart. She!—to be actually *pitied* by Violet Vere, because she had been unable to keep her husband's love! This idea tortured her very soul,—but she was silent.

"I thought you were my friend, Clara?" she said suddenly, with a strange wistfulness.

"So I am, Thelma," murmured Lady Winsleigh, a guilty flush colouring her cheeks.

“You have made me very miserable,” went on Thelma gravely, and with pathetic simplicity, “and I am sorry indeed that we ever met. I was so happy till I knew you!—and yet I was very fond of you! I am sure you mean everything for the best, but I cannot think it is so. And it is all so dark and desolate now—why have you taken such pains to make me sad? Why have you so often tried to make me doubt my husband’s love?—why have you come to-day so quickly to tell me I have lost it? But for you, I might never have known this sorrow,—I might have died soon, in happy ignorance, believing in my darling’s truth as I believe in God!”

Her voice broke, and a hard sob choked her utterance. For once Lady Winsleigh’s conscience smote her—for once she felt ashamed, and dared not offer consolation to the innocent soul she had so wantonly stricken. For a minute or two there was silence—broken only by the monotonous ticking of the clock and the crackling of the fire.

Presently Thelma spoke again. “I will ask you to go away now and leave me, Clara,” she said simply. “When the heart is sorrowful, it is best to be alone. Good-bye!” And she gently held out her hand.

“Poor Thelma!” said Lady Winsleigh, taking it with an affectation of tenderness. “What will you do?”

Thelma did not answer; she sat mute and rigid.

“You are thinking unkindly of me just now,” continued Clara softly; “but I felt it was my duty to tell you the worst at once. It’s no good living in a delusion! I’m very, very sorry for you, Thelma!”

Thelma remained perfectly silent. Lady Winsleigh moved towards the door, and as she opened it looked back at her. The girl might have been a lifeless figure for any movement that could be perceived about her. Her face was white as marble—her eyes were fixed on the sparkling fire—her very hands looked stiff and pallid as wax, as they lay clasped in her lap—the letter—the cruel letter,—had fallen at her feet. She seemed as one in a trance of misery—and so Lady Winsleigh left her.

CHAPTER IX.

“O my lord, O Love,
I have laid my life at thy feet;
Have thy will thereof
For what shall please thee is sweet!”

SWINBURNE.

SHE roused herself at last. Unclasping her hands, she pushed back her hair from her brows and sighed heavily. Shivering as with intense cold, she rose from the chair she had so long occupied, and stood upright, mechanically gathering around her the long fur mantle that she had not as yet taken off. Catching sight of the letter where it lay, a gleaming speck of white on the rich dark hues of the carpet, she picked it up and read it through again calmly and comprehensively,—then folded it up carefully as though it were something of inestimable value. Her thoughts were a little confused,—she could only realize clearly two distinct things,—first, that Philip was unhappy,—secondly, that she was in the way of his happiness. She did not pause to consider how this change in him had been effected,—moreover,

she never imagined that the letter he had written could refer to any one but himself. Hers was a nature that accepted facts as they appeared—she never sought for ulterior motives or disguised meanings. True, she could not understand her husband's admiration for Violet Vere, "But then"—she thought—"many other men admire her too. And so it is certain there must be something about her that wins love,—something I cannot see!"

And presently she put aside all other considerations, and only pondered on one thing,—how should she remove herself from the path of her husband's pleasure? For she had no doubt but that she was an [obstacle to his enjoyment. He had made promises to Violet Vere which he was "ready to fulfil,"—he offered her "an honourable position,"—he desired her "not to condemn him to death,"—he besought her to let his words "carry more weight with her."

"It is because I am here," thought Thelma wearily. "She would listen to him if I were gone!" She had the strangest notions of wifely duty—odd minglings of the stern Norse customs with the gentler teachings of Christianity,—yet in both cases the lines of woman's life were clearly defined in one word—obedience. Most women, receiving an apparent proof of a husband's infidelity would have made what is termed a "scene,"—would have confronted him with rage and tears, and personal abuse,—but Thelma was

too gentle for this,—too gentle to resist what seemed to be Philip's wish and will, and far too proud to stay where it appeared evident she was not wanted. Moreover she could not bear the idea of speaking to him on such a subject as his connection with Violet Vere,—the hot colour flushed her cheeks with a sort of shame as she thought of it.

Of course, she was weak—of course, she was foolish,—we will grant that she was anything the reader chooses to call her. It is much better for a woman nowadays to be defiant rather than yielding,—aggressive, not submissive,—violent, not meek. We all know that! To abuse a husband well all round, is the modern method of managing him! But poor, foolish, loving, sensitive Thelma had nothing of the magnificent strength of mind possessed by most wives of to-day,—she could only realize that Philip—her Philip—was “utterly weary and broken-hearted”—for the sake of another woman—and that other woman actually pitied *her*! She pitied herself too, a little vaguely—her brows ached and throbbed violently—there was a choking sensation in her throat, but she could not weep. Tears would have relieved her tired brain, but no tears fell. She strove to decide on some immediate plan of action,—Philip would be home to-morrow,—she recoiled at the thought of meeting him, knowing what she knew. Glancing dreamily at

her own figure, reflected by the lamp-light in the long mirror opposite, she recognized that she was fully attired in outdoor costume—all save her hat, which she had taken off after her first greeting of Lady Winsleigh, and which was still on the table at her side. She looked at the clock,—it was five minutes to seven. Eight o'clock was her dinner-hour, and thinking of this, she suddenly rang the bell. Morris immediately answered it.

“I shall not dine at home,” she said in her usual gentle voice, “I am going to see some friends this evening. I may not be back till—till late.”

“Very well, my lady,” and Morris retired without seeing anything remarkable in his mistress’s announcement. Thelma drew a long breath of relief as he disappeared, and, steadying her nerves by a strong effort, passed into her own boudoir,—the little sanctum specially endeared to her by Philip’s frequent presence there. How cosy and comfortable a home-nest it looked!—a small fire glowed warmly in the grate, and Britta, whose duty it was to keep this particular room in order, had lit the lamp,—a rosy globe supported by a laughing cupid,—and had drawn the velvet curtains close at the window to keep out the fog and chilly air—there were fragrant flowers on the table,—Thelma’s own favourite lounge was drawn up to the fender in readiness for her,—and opposite to it stood the deep, old-fashioned easy chair

in which Philip always sat. She looked round upon all these familiar things with a dreary sense of strangeness and desolation, and the curves of her sweet mouth trembled a little and drooped piteously. But her resolve was taken, and she did not hesitate or weep. She sat down to her desk and wrote a few brief lines to her father—this letter she addressed and stamped ready for posting.

Then for a while she remained apparently lost in painful musings, playing with the pen she held, and uncertain what to do. Presently she drew a sheet of note-paper towards her, and began, "My darling boy." As these words appeared under her hand on the white page, her forced calm nearly gave way,—a low cry of intense agony escaped from her lips, and, dropping the pen, she rose and paced the room restlessly, one hand pressed against her heart as though that action could still its rapid beatings. Once more she essayed the hard task she had set herself to fulfil—the task of bidding farewell to the husband in whom her life was centred. Piteous, passionate words came quickly from her overcharged and almost breaking heart—words, tender, touching,—full of love, and absolutely free from all reproach. Little did she guess as she wrote that parting letter, what desperate misery it would cause to the receiver!—

When she had finished it, she felt quieted—even more composed than before. She folded and

sealed it—then put it out of sight and rang for Britta. That little maiden soon appeared, and seemed surprised to see her mistress still in walking costume.

“Have you only just come in, Fröken?” she ventured to inquire.

“No, I came home some time ago,” returned Thelma gently. “But I was talking to Lady Winsleigh in the drawing-room,—and as I am going out again this evening I shall not require to change my dress. I want you to post this letter for me, Britta.”

And she held out the one addressed to her father, Olaf Guldmar. Britta took it, but her mind still revolved the question of her mistress’s attire.

“If you are going to spend the evening with friends,” she suggested, “would it not be better to change?”

“I have on a velvet gown,” said Thelma, with a rather wearied patience. “It is quite dressy enough for where I am going.” She paused abruptly, and Britta looked at her inquiringly.

“Are you tired, Fröken Thelma?” she asked. “You are so pale!”

“I have a slight headache,” Thelma answered. “It is nothing,—it will soon pass. I wish you to post that letter at once, Britta.”

“Very well, Fröken.” Britta still hesitated. “Will you be out all the evening?” was her next query.

“Yes.”

“Then perhaps you will not mind if I go and see Louise, and take supper with her? She has asked me, and Mr. Briggs”—here Britta laughed—“is coming to see if I can go. He will escort me, he says!” And she laughed again.

Thelma forced herself to smile. “You can go, by all means, Britta! But I thought you did not like Lady Winsleigh’s French maid?”

“I don’t like her much,” Britta admitted—“still, she means to be kind and agreeable, I think. “And”—here she eyed Thelma with a mysterious and important air—“I want to ask her a question about something very particular.”

“Then, go and stay as long as you like, dear,” said Thelma, a sudden impulse of affection causing her to caress softly her little maid’s ruffled brown curls, “I shall not be back till—till quite late. And when you return from the post, I shall be gone—so—good-bye!”

“Good-bye!” exclaimed Britta wonderingly. “Why, where are you going? One would think you were starting on a long journey. You speak so strangely, Fröken!”

“Do I?” and Thelma smiled kindly. “It is because my head aches, I suppose. But it is not strange to say good-bye, Britta!”

Britta caught her hand. “Where are you going?” she persisted.

“To see some friends,” responded Thelma

quietly. "Now do not ask any more questions, Britta, but go and post my letter. I want father to get it as soon as possible, and you will lose the post if you are not very quick."

Thus reminded, Britta hastened off, determining to run all the way, in order to get back before her mistress left the house. Thelma, however, was too quick for her. As soon as Britta had gone, she took the letter she had written to Philip, and slipped it within the pages of a small volume of poems he had lately been reading. It was a new book, entitled "*Gladys the Singer*," and its leading *motif* was the old, never-exhausted subject of a woman's too faithful love, betrayal, and despair. As she opened it, her eyes fell by chance on a few lines of hopeless yet musical melancholy, which, like a sad song heard suddenly, made her throat swell with rising yet restrained tears. They ran thus:—

"Oh! I can drown, or, like a broken lyre,
Be thrown to earth, or cast upon a fire,—
I can be made to feel the pangs of death,
And yet be constant to the quest of breath,—
Our poor pale trick of living through the lies
We name Existence when that 'something' dies
Which we call Honour. Many and many a way
Can I be struck or fretted night and day
In some new fashion,—or condemn'd the while
To take for food the semblance of a smile,—
The left-off rapture of a slain caress,—"

Ah!—she caught her breath sobbingly, "The left-off rapture of a slain caress!" Yes,—that

would be her portion now if—if she stayed to receive it. But she would not stay! She turned over the volume abstractedly, scarcely conscious of the action,—and suddenly, as if the poet-writer of it had been present to probe her soul and make her inmost thoughts public, she read:—

“Because I am unlov’d of thee to-day,
And undesired as sea-weeds in the sea!”

Yes!—that was the “because” of everything that swayed her sorrowful spirit,—“because” she was “unlov’d and undesired.”

She hesitated no longer, but shut the book with her farewell letter inside it, and put it back in its former place on the little table beside Philip’s arm-chair. Then she considered how she should distinguish it by some mark that should attract her husband’s attention towards it,—and loosening from her neck a thin gold chain on which was suspended a small diamond cross with the names “Philip” and “Thelma” engraved at the back, she twisted it round the little book, and left it so that the sparkle of the jewels should be seen distinctly on the cover. Now was there anything more to be done? She divested herself of all her valuable ornaments, keeping only her wedding-ring and its companion circlet of brilliants,—she emptied her purse of all money save that which was absolutely necessary for her journey—then she put on her hat, and began to fasten her long cloak slowly, for her fingers were icy cold and

trembled very strangely. Stay,—there was her husband's portrait,—she might take that, she thought, with a sort of touching timidity. It was a miniature on ivory—and had been painted expressly for her,—she placed it inside her dress, against her bosom.

“He has been too good to me,” she murmured; “and I have been too happy,—happier than I deserved to be. Excess of happiness must always end in sorrow.”

She looked dreamily at Philip's empty chair—in fancy she could see his familiar figure seated there, and she sighed as she thought of the face she loved so well,—the passion of his eyes,—the tenderness of his smile. Softly she kissed the place where his head had rested,—then turned resolutely away.

She was giving up everything, she thought, to another woman,—but then—that other woman, however incredible it seemed, was the one Philip loved best,—his own written words were a proof of this. There was no choice therefore,—his pleasure was her first consideration,—everything must yield to that, so she imagined,—her own life was nothing, in her estimation, compared to his desire. Such devotion as hers was of course absurd—it amounted to weak self-immolation, and would certainly be accounted as supremely foolish by most women who have husbands, and who, when they swear to “obey,” mean to break the

vow at every convenient opportunity—but Thelma could not alter her strange nature, and, with her, obedience meant the extreme letter of the law of utter submission.

Leaving the room she had so lately called her own, she passed into the entrance-hall. Morris was not there, and she did not summon him,—she opened the street-door for herself, and shutting it quietly behind her, she stood alone in the cold street, where the fog had now grown so dense that the lamp-posts were scarcely visible. She walked on for a few paces rather bewildered and chilled by the piercing bitterness of the air,—then, rallying her forces, she hailed a passing cab, and told the man to take her to Charing Cross Station. She was not familiar with London—and Charing Cross was the only great railway terminus she could just then think of.

Arrived there, the glare of the electric light, the jostling passengers rushing to and from the trains, the shouts and wrangling of porters and cabmen, confused her not a little,—and the bold looks of admiration bestowed on her freely by the male loungers sauntering near the doors of the restaurant and hotel, made her shrink and tremble for shame. She had never travelled entirely alone before—and she began to be frightened at the pandemonium of sights and noises that surged around her. Yet she never once thought of re-

turning,—she never dreamed of going to any of her London friends, lest on hearing of her trouble, they might reproach Philip—and this Thelma would not have endured. For the same reason, she had said nothing to Britta.

In her then condition, it seemed to her that only one course lay open for her to follow,—and that was to go quietly home,—home to the Altenfjord. No one would be to blame for her departure but herself, she thought,—and Philip would be free. Thus she reasoned,—if, indeed, she reasoned at all. But there was such a frozen stillness in her soul—her senses were so numbed with pain, that as yet she scarcely realized either what had happened or what she herself was doing. She was as one walking in sleep—the awakening, bitter as death, was still to come.

Presently a great rush of people began to stream towards her from one of the platforms, and trucks of luggage, heralded by shouts of, “Out of the way, there!” and “By’r leave!” came trundling rapidly along—the tidal train from the Continent had just arrived.

Dismayed at the increasing confusion and uproar, Thelma addressed herself to an official with a gold band round his hat.

“Can you tell me,” she asked timidly, “where I shall take a ticket for Hull?”

The man glanced at the fair, anxious face, and smiled good-humouredly.

“ You’ve come to the wrong station, miss,” he said. “ You want the Midland line.”

“ The Midland ? ” Thelma felt more bewildered than ever.

“ Yes,—the *Midland*,” he repeated rather testily. “ It’s a good way from here—you’d better take a cab.”

She moved away,—but started and drew herself back into a shadowed corner, colouring deeply as the sound of a rich, mellifluous voice, which she instantly recognized, smote suddenly on her ears.

“ And as I before remarked, my good fellow,” the voice was saying, “ I am not a disciple of the semi-obscure. If a man has a thought which is worth declaring, let him declare it with a free and noble utterance—don’t let him wrap it up in multifarious parcels of dreary verbosity ! There’s too much of that kind of thing going on nowadays—in England, at least. There’s a kind of imitation of art which isn’t art at all,—a morbid, bilious, bad imitation. You only get close to the real goddess in Italy. I wish I could persuade you to come and pass the winter with me there ! ”

It was Beau Lovelace who spoke, and he was talking to George Lorimer. The two had met in Paris,—Lovelace was on his way to London, where a matter of business summoned him for a few days, and Lorimer, somewhat tired of the French capital, decided to return with him. And here they were,

—just arrived at Charing Cross,—and they walked across the station arm in arm, little imagining who watched them from behind the shelter of one of the waiting-room doors, with a yearning sorrow in her grave blue eyes. They stopped almost opposite to her to light their cigars,—she saw Lorimer's face quite distinctly, and heard his answer to Lovelace.

“Well, I'll see what I can do about it, Beau! You know my mother always likes to get away from London in winter—but whether we ought to inflict ourselves upon you,—you being a literary man too——”

“Nonsense, you won't interfere in the least with the flow of inky inspiration,” laughed Beau. “And as for your mother, I'm in love with her, as you are aware! I admire her almost as much as I do Lady Bruce-Errington—and that's saying a great deal! By-the-by, if Phil can get through his share of this country's business, he might do worse than bring his beautiful Thelma to the Lake of Como for a while. I'll ask him!”

And having lit their Havannas successfully, they walked on and soon disappeared. For one instant Thelma felt strongly inclined to run after them like a little forlorn child that had lost its way,—and, unburdening herself of all her miseries to the sympathetic George, entreat, with tears, to be taken back to that husband who did not want her any more. But she soon overcame this emo-

tion,—and calling to mind the instructions of the official personage whose advice she had sought, she hurried out of the huge, brilliantly lit station, and taking a hansom, was driven, as she requested, to the Midland. Here the rather gloomy aspect of the place oppressed her as much as the garish bustle of Charing Cross had bewildered her,—but she was somewhat relieved when she learned that a train for Hull would start in ten minutes. Hurrying to the ticket office, she found there before her a kindly faced woman with a baby in her arms, who was just taking a third-class ticket to Hull, and as she felt lonely and timid, Thelma at once decided to travel third-class also, and if possible in the same compartment with this cheerful matron, who, as soon as she had secured her ticket, walked away to the train, hushing her infant in her arms as she went. Thelma followed her at a little distance—and as soon as she saw her enter a third-class carriage, she hastened her steps and entered also, quite thankful to have secured some companionship for the long, cold journey. The woman glanced at her a little curiously—it was strange to see so lovely and young a creature travelling all alone at night,—and she asked kindly——

“Be you goin’ fur, miss?”

Thelma smiled—it was pleasant to be spoken to, she thought.

“Yes,” she answered. “All the way to Hull.”

"'Tis a cold night for a journey," continued her companion.

"Yes, indeed," answered Thelma. "It must be cold for your little baby."

And unconsciously her voice softened and her eyes grew sad as she looked across at the sleeping infant.

"Oh, he's as warm as toast!" laughed the mother cheerily. "He gets the best of everything, he do. It's yourself that's looking cold, my dear—in spite of your warm cloak. Will ye have this shawl?"

And she offered Thelma a homely gray woollen wrap with much kindly earnestness of manner.

"I am quite warm, thank you," said Thelma gently, accepting the shawl, however, to please her fellow-traveller. "It is a headache I have which makes me look pale. And I am very, very tired!"

Her voice trembled a little,—she sighed and closed her eyes. She felt strangely weak and giddy,—she seemed to be slipping away from herself and from all the comprehension of life,—she wondered vaguely who and what she was. Had her marriage with Philip been all a dream?—perhaps she had never left the Altenfjord after all! Perhaps she would wake up presently and see the old farm-house quite unchanged, with the doves flying about the roof, and Sigurd wandering

under the pines, as was his custom. Ah, dear Sigurd! Poor Sigurd! he had loved her, she thought—nay, he loved her still,—he could not be dead! Oh, yes,—she must have been dreaming,—she felt certain she was lying on her own little white bed at home, asleep;—she would by-and-by open her eyes and get up and look through her little latticed window, and see the sun sparkling on the water, and the *Eulalie* at anchor in the Fjord—and her father would ask Sir Philip and his friends to spend the afternoon at the farm-house—and Philip would come and stroll with her through the garden and down to the shore, and would talk to her in that low, caressing voice of his,—and though she loved him dearly, she must never, never let him know of it, because she was not worthy! . . . She woke from these musings with a violent start and a sick shiver running through all her frame,—and looking wildly about her, saw that she was reclining on some one's shoulder,—some one was dabbing a wet handkerchief on her forehead—her hat was off and her cloak was loosened.

“There, my dear, you're better now!” said a kindly voice in her ear. “Lor! I thought you was dead—that I did! ’Twas a bad faint indeed. And with the train jolting along like this too! It was lucky I had a flask of cold water with me. Raise your head a little—that's it! Poor thing,—you're as white as a sheet! You're not fit to travel, my dear—you're not indeed.”

Thelma raised herself slowly, and with a sudden impulse kissed the good woman's honest, rosy face, to her intense astonishment and pleasure.

"You are very kind to me!" she said tremulously. "I am so sorry to have troubled you. I do feel ill—but it will soon pass."

And she smoothed her ruffled hair, and sitting up erect, endeavoured to smile. Her companion eyed her pale face compassionately, and taking up her sleeping baby from the shawl on which she had laid it while ministering to Thelma's needs, began to rock it slowly to and fro. Thelma, meanwhile, became sensible of the rapid movement of the train.

"We have left London?" she asked with an air of surprise.

"Nearly half an hour ago, my dear." Then, after a pause, during which she had watched Thelma very closely, she said—

"I think you're married, aren't you, dearie?"

"Yes." Thelma answered, a slight tinge of colour warming her fair pale cheeks.

"Your husband, maybe, will meet you at Hull?"

"No,—he is in London," said Thelma simply. "I am going to see my father."

This answer satisfied her humble friend, who, noticing her extreme fatigue and the effort it cost her to speak, forbore to ask any more questions, but good-naturedly recommended her to try and

sleep. She slept soundly herself for the greater part of the journey; but Thelma was now feverishly wide awake, and her eyeballs ached and burned as though there were fire behind them.

Gradually her nerves began to be wound up to an extreme tension of excitement—she forgot all her troubles in listening with painful intentness to the rush and roar of the train through the darkness. The lights of passing stations and signal-posts gleamed like scattered and flying stars—there was the frequent shriek of the engine-whistle,—the serpent-hiss of escaping steam. She peered through the window—all was blackness; there seemed to be no earth, no sky,—only a sable chaos, through which the train flew like a flame-mouthed demon. Always that rush and roar! She began to feel as if she could stand it no longer. She must escape from that continuous, confusing sound—it maddened her brain. Nothing was easier; she would open the carriage-door and get out! Surely she could manage to jump off the step, even though the train was in motion!

Danger! She smiled at that idea,—there was no danger; and, if there was, it did not much matter. Nothing mattered now,—now that she had lost her husband's love! She glanced at the woman opposite, who slept profoundly—the baby had slipped a little from its mother's arms, and lay with its tiny face turned towards Thelma. It was a pretty creature, with soft cheeks and a sweet

little mouth,—she looked at it with a vague, wild smile. Again, again that rush and roar surged like a storm in her ears and distracted her mind! She rose suddenly and seized the handle of the carriage door. Another instant, and she would have sprung to certain death,—when suddenly the sleeping baby woke, and, opening its mild blue eyes, gazed at her.

She met its glance as one fascinated,—almost unconsciously her fingers dropped from the door-handle,—the little baby still looked at her in dreamlike, meditative fashion,—its mother slept profoundly. She bent lower and lower over the child. With a beating heart she ventured to touch the small, pink hand that lay outside its wrappings like a softly curved rose-leaf. With a sort of elf-like confidence and contentment the feeble, wee fingers closed and curled round hers,—and held her fast! Weak as a silken thread, yet stronger in its persuasive force than a grasp of iron, that soft, light pressure controlled and restrained her, . . . very gradually the mists of her mind cleared,—the rattling, thunderous dash of the train grew less dreadful, less monotonous, less painful to her sense of hearing,—her bosom heaved convulsively, and all suddenly her eyes filled with tears—merciful tears, which at first welled up slowly, and were hot as fire, but which soon began to fall faster and faster in large, bright drops down her pale cheeks. Seeing that its

mother still slept, she took the baby gently into her own fair arms,—and rocked it to and fro with many a sobbing murmur of tenderness;—the little thing smiled drowsily and soon fell asleep again, all unconscious that its timely look and innocent touch had saved poor Thelma's life and reason.

She, meanwhile, wept on softly, till her tired brain and heart were somewhat relieved of their heavy burden,—the entanglement of her thoughts became unravelled,—and, though keenly aware of the blank desolation of her life, she was able to raise herself in spirit to the Giver of all Love and Consolation, and to pray humbly for that patience and resignation which now alone could serve her needs. And she communed with herself and God in silence, as the train rushed on northwards. Her fellow-traveller woke up as they were nearing their destination, and, seeing her holding the baby, was profuse in her thanks for this kindness. And when they at last reached Hull, about half an hour after midnight, the good woman was exceedingly anxious to know if she could be of any service,—but Thelma gently, yet firmly, refused all her offers of assistance.

They parted in the most friendly manner,—Thelma kissing the child, through whose unconscious means, as she now owned to herself, she had escaped a terrible death,—and then she went directly to a quiet hotel she knew of, which was kept by a native of Christiania, a man who had

formerly been acquainted with her father. At first, when this worthy individual saw a lady arrive, alone, young, richly dressed, and without luggage, he was inclined to be suspicious,—but as soon as she addressed him in Norwegian, and told him who she was, he greeted her with the utmost deference and humility.

“The daughter of Jarl Güldmar,” he said, continuing to speak in his own tongue, “honours my house by entering it!”

Thelma smiled a little. “The days of the great Jarls are past, Friedhof,” she replied somewhat sadly, “and my father is content to be what he is,—a simple *bonde*.”

Friedhof shook his head quite obstinately. “A Jarl is always a Jarl,” he declared. “Nothing can alter a man’s birth and nature. And the last time I saw Valdemar Svensen,—he who lives with your father now,—he was careful always to speak of the *Jarl*, and seldom or never did he mention him in any other fashion. And now, noble Fröken, in what manner can I serve you?”

Thelma told him briefly that she was going to see her father on business, and that she was desirous of starting for Norway the next day as early as possible.

Friedhof held up his hands in amazement. “Ah! most surely you forget,” he exclaimed, using the picturesque expressions of his native speech, “that this is the sleeping time of the sun!

Even at the Hardanger Fjord it is dark and silent,—the falling streams freeze with cold on their way; and if it is so at the Hardanger, what will it be at the Alten? And there is no passenger ship going to Christiania or Bergen for a fortnight!”

Thelma clasped her hands in dismay. “But I *must* go!” she cried impatiently; “I must, indeed, good Friedhof! I cannot stay here! Surely, surely there is some vessel that would take me,—some fishing boat,—what does it matter how I travel, so long as I get away?”

The landlord looked at her rather wonderingly. “Nay, if it is indeed so urgent, noble Fröken,” he replied, “do not trouble, for there is a means of making the journey. But for *you*, and in such bitter weather, it seems a cruelty to speak of it. A steam cargo-boat leaves here for Hammerfest and the North Cape to-morrow—it will pass the Altenfjord. No doubt you could go with that, if you so choose,—but there will be no warmth or comfort, and there are heavy storms on the North Sea. I know the captain; and ’tis true he takes his wife with him, so there would be a woman on board,—yet——”

Thelma interrupted him. She pressed two sovereigns into his hand.

“Say no more, Friedhof,” she said eagerly, “You will take me to see this captain—you will tell him I must go with him. My father will

thank you for this kindness to me, even better than I can."

"It does not seem to me a kindness at all," returned Friedhof with frank bluntness. "I would be loth to sail the seas myself in such weather. And I thought you were so grandly married, Fröken Güldmar,—though I forget your wedded name,—how comes it that your husband is not with you?"

"He is very busy in London," answered Thelma. "He knows where I am going. Do not be at all anxious, Friedhof,—I shall make the journey very well and I am not afraid of storm or wild seas."

Friedhof still looked dubious, but finally yielded to her entreaties and agreed to arrange her passage for her in the morning.

She stayed at his hotel that night, and with the very early dawn accompanied him on board the ship he had mentioned. It was a small, awkwardly built craft, with an ugly crooked black funnel out of which the steam was hissing and spitting with quite an unnecessary degree of violence—the decks were wet and dirty, and the whole vessel was pervaded with a sickening smell of whale-oil. The captain, a gruff red-faced fellow, looked rather surlily at his unexpected passenger—but was soon mollified by her gentle manner, and the readiness with which she paid the money he demanded for taking her.

“You won’t be very warm,” he said, eyeing her from head to foot—“but I can lend you a rug to sleep in.”

Thelma smiled and thanked him. He called to his wife, a thin, overworked-looking creature, who put up her head from a window in the cabin, at his summons.

“Here’s a lady going with us,” he announced. “Look after her, will you?” The woman nodded. Then, once more addressing himself to Thelma, he said, “We shall have nasty weather and a wicked sea!”

“I do not mind!” she answered quietly, and turning to Friedhof who had come to see her off, she shook hands with him warmly and thanked him for the trouble he had taken in her behalf. The good landlord bade her farewell somewhat reluctantly,—he had a presentiment that there was something wrong with the beautiful, golden-haired daughter of the *Jarl*—and that perhaps he ought to have prevented her making this uncomfortable and possibly perilous voyage. But it was too late now,—and at a little before seven o’clock, the vessel,—which rejoiced in the name of the *Black Polly*,—left the harbour, and steamed fussily down the Humber in the teeth of a sudden storm of sleet and snow.

Her departure had no interest for any one save Friedhof, who stood watching her till she was no more than a speck on the turbid water.

He kept his post, regardless of the piercing cold of the gusty, early morning air, till she had entirely disappeared, and then returned to his own house and his daily business in a rather depressed frame of mind. He was haunted by the pale face and serious eyes of Thelma—she looked very ill, he thought. He began to reproach himself,—why had he been such a fool as to let her go?—why had he not detained her?—or, at any rate, persuaded her to rest a few days in Hull? He looked at the threatening sky and the falling flakes of snow with a shiver.

“What weather!” he muttered, “and there must be a darkness as of death at the Altenfjord!”

Meanwhile the *Black Polly*—unhandsome as she was in appearance, struggled gallantly with and overcame an army of furious waves that rose to greet her as she rounded Spurn Head, and long ere Thelma closed her weary eyes in an effort to sleep, was plunging, shivering, and fighting her slow way through shattering mountainous billows and a tempest of sleet, snow, and tossing foam across the wild North Sea.

CHAPTER X.

“What of her glass without her? The blank grey
There, where the pool is blind of the moon’s face,—
Her dress without her? The tossed empty space
Of cloud-rack whence the moon has passed away!”

DANTE G. ROSSETTI.

“Good God!” cried Errington impatiently.
“What’s the matter? Speak out!”

He had just arrived home. He had barely set foot within his own door, and full of lover-like ardour and eagerness was about to hasten to his wife’s room,—when his old servant Morris stood in his way trembling and pale-faced,—looking helplessly from him to Neville,—who was as much astonished as Sir Philip, at the man’s woe-begone appearance.

“Something has happened,” he stammered faintly at last. “Her ladyship——”

Philip started—his heart beat quickly and then seemed to grow still with a horrible sensation of fear.

“What of her?” he demanded in low hoarse tones. “Is she ill?”

Morris threw up his hands with a gesture of despair.

“Sir Philip, my dear master!” cried the poor old man. “I do not know whether she is ill or well—I cannot guess! My lady went out last night at a little before eight o’clock,—and—and she has never come home at all! We cannot tell what has become of her! She has gone!”

And tears of distress and anxiety filled his eyes. Philip stood mute. He could not understand it. All colour fled from his face—he seemed as though he had received a sudden blow on the head which had stunned him.

“Gone!” he said mechanically. “Thelma—my wife—gone! Why should she go?”

And he stared fixedly at Neville, who laid one hand soothingly on his arm.

“Perhaps she is with friends,” he suggested. “She may be at Lady Winsleigh’s or Mrs. Lorimer’s.”

“No, no!” interrupted Morris. “Britta, who stayed up all night for her, has since been to every house that my lady visits and no one has seen or heard of her!”

“Where is Britta?” demanded Philip suddenly.

“She has gone again to Lady Winsleigh’s,” answered Morris. “She says it is there that mischief has been done,—I don’t know what she means!”

Philip shook off his secretary's sympathetic touch, and strode through the rooms to Thelma's boudoir. He put aside the velvet curtains of the portière with a noiseless hand—somehow he felt as if, in spite of all he had just heard, she *must* be there as usual to welcome him with that serene sweet smile which was the sunshine of his life. The empty desolate air of the room smote him with a sense of bitter pain,—only the plaintive warble of her pet thrush, who was singing to himself most mournfully in his gilded cage, broke the heavy silence. He looked about him vacantly. All sorts of dark forebodings crowded on his mind,—she must have met with some accident, he thought with a shudder,—for that she would depart from him in this sudden way of her own accord and for no reason whatsoever seemed to him incredible—impossible.

“What have ~~I~~ done that she should leave me?” he asked half aloud and wonderingly.

Everything that had seemed to him of worth a few hours ago became valueless in this moment of time. What cared he now for the business of Parliament—for distinction or honours among men? Nothing—less than nothing! Without her, the world was empty—its ambitions, its pride, its good, its evil, seemed but the dreariest and most foolish trifles!

“Not even a message?” he thought. “No hint of where she meant to go—no word of ex-

planation for me? Surely I must be dreaming—my Thelma would never have deserted me!”

A sort of sob rose in his throat, and he pressed his hand strongly over his eyes to keep down the womanish drops that threatened to overflow them. After a minute or two, he went to her desk and opened it, thinking that there perhaps she might have left a note of farewell. There was nothing—nothing save a little heap of money and jewels. These Thelma had herself placed, before her sorrowful, silent departure, in the corner where he now found them.

More puzzled than ever, he glanced searchingly round the room—and his eyes were at once attracted by the sparkle of the diamond cross that lay uppermost on the cover of “Gladys the Singer,” the book of poems which was in its usual place on his own reading table. In another second he seized it—he unwound the slight gold chain—he opened the little volume tremblingly. Yes!—there was a letter within its pages addressed to himself,—now, now he should know all! He tore it open with feverish haste—two folded sheets of paper fell out,—one was his own epistle to Violet Vere, and this, to his consternation, he perceived first. Full of a sudden misgiving he laid it aside, and began to read Thelma’s parting words.

“My darling boy,” she wrote—

“A friend of yours and mine brought me

the enclosed letter, and though, perhaps, it was wrong of me to read it, I hope you will forgive me for having done so. I do not quite understand it, and I cannot bear to think about it—but it seems that you are tired of your poor Thelma! I do not blame you, dearest, for I am sure that in some way or other the fault is mine, and it does grieve me so much to think you are unhappy! I know that I am very ignorant of many things, and that I am not suited to this London life—and I fear I shall never understand its ways. But one thing I can do, and that is to let you be free, my Philip—quite free! And so I am going back to the Altenfjord, where I will stay till you want me again, if you ever do. My heart is yours and I shall always love you till I die,—and though it seems to me just now better that we should part, to give you greater ease and pleasure, still you must always remember that I have no reproaches to make to you. I am only sorry to think my love has wearied you,—for you have been all goodness and tenderness to me. And so that people shall not talk about me or you, you will simply say to them that I have gone to see my father, and they will think nothing strange in that. Be kind to Britta,—I have told her nothing, as it would only make her miserable. Do not be angry that I go away—I cannot bear to stay here, knowing all. And so, good-bye, my love, my dearest one!—if you were to love many women more than me, I still

should love you best—I still would gladly die to serve you. Remember this always,—that, however long we may be parted, and though all the world should come between us, I am, and ever shall be your faithful wife,

“THELMA.”

The ejaculation that broke from Errington's lips as he finished reading this letter was more powerful than reverent. Stinging tears darted to his eyes—he pressed his lips passionately on the fair writing.

“My darling—my darling!” he murmured. “What a miserable misunderstanding!”

Then without another moment's delay he rushed into Neville's study and cried abruptly—

“Look here! It's all your fault!”

“*My* fault!” gasped the amazed secretary.

“Yes—your fault!” shouted Errington almost beside himself with grief and rage. “Your fault, and that of your accursed *wife*, Violet Vere!”

And he dashed the letter, the cause of all the mischief, furiously down on the table. Neville shrank and shivered,—his grey head drooped,—he stretched out his hands appealingly.

“For God's sake, Sir Philip, tell me what I've done?” he exclaimed piteously.

Errington strode up and down the room in a perfect fever of impatience.

“By Heaven, it's enough to drive me mad!”

he burst forth. "Your wife!—your wife!—confound her! When you first discovered her in that shameless actress, didn't I want to tell Thelma all about it—that very night?—and didn't you beg me not to do so? Your silly scruples stood in the way of everything! I was a fool to listen to you—a fool to meddle in your affairs—and—and I wish to God I'd never seen or heard of you!"

Neville turned very white, but remained speechless.

"Read that letter!" went on Philip impetuously. "You've seen it before! It's the last one I wrote to your wife imploring her to see you and speak with you. Here it comes, the devil knows how, into Thelma's hands. She's quite in the dark about *your* secret, and fancies I wrote it on my own behalf! It looks like it too—looks exactly as if I were pleading for myself and breaking my heart over that detestable stage-fiend—by Jove! it's too horrible!" And he gave a gesture of loathing and contempt.

Neville heard him in utter bewilderment. "Not possible!" he muttered. "Not possible—it can't be!"

"Can't be? It *is*!" shouted Philip. "And if you'd let me tell Thelma everything from the first, all this wouldn't have happened. And you ask me what you've done! *Done!* You've parted me from the sweetest, dearest girl in the world!"

And throwing himself into a chair, he covered

his face with his hand and a great uncontrollable sob broke from his lips.

Neville was in despair. Of course, it was his fault—he saw it all clearly. He painfully recalled all that had happened since that night at the Brilliant Theatre when with a sickening horror he had discovered Violet Vere to be no other than Violet Neville,—his own little Violet! . . . as he had once called her—his wife that he had lost and mourned as though she were some pure dead woman, lying sweetly at rest in a quiet grave. He remembered Thelma's shuddering repugnance at the sight of her,—a repugnance which he himself had shared—and which made him shrink with fastidious aversion from the idea of confiding to any one but Sir Philip, the miserable secret of his connection with her. Sir Philip had humoured him in this fancy, little imagining that any mischief would come of it—and the reward of his kindly sympathy was this,—his name was compromised, his home desolate, and his wife estranged from him!

In the first pangs of the remorse and sorrow that filled his heart, Neville could gladly have gone out and drowned himself. Presently he began to think,—was there not some one else besides himself who might possibly be to blame for all this misery? For instance, who could have brought or sent that letter to Lady Errington? In her high station, she, so lofty, so pure, so far above the rest of her sex, would have been the last person to

make any inquiries about such a woman as Violet Vere. How had it all happened? He looked imploringly for some minutes at the dejected figure in the chair without daring to offer a word of consolation. Presently he ventured a remark—

“Sir Philip!” he stammered. “It will soon be all right,—her ladyship will come back immediately. I myself will explain—it’s—it’s only a misunderstanding . . .”

Errington moved in his chair impatiently, but said nothing. Only a misunderstanding! How many there are who can trace back broken friendships and severed loves, to that one thing—“only a misunderstanding!” The tenderest relations are often the most delicate and subtle, and “trifles light as air” may scatter and utterly destroy the sensitive gossamer threads extending between one heart and another, as easily as a child’s passing foot destroys the spider’s web woven on the dewy grass in the early mornings of spring.

Presently Sir Philip started up—his lashes were wet and his face was flushed.

“It’s no good sitting here,” he said, rapidly buttoning on his overcoat. “I must go after her. Let all the business go to the devil! Write and say I won’t stand for Middleborough—I resign in favour of the Liberal candidate. I’m off to Norway to-night.”

“To Norway!” cried Neville. “Has she gone *there*? At this season——”

He broke off, for at that moment Britta entered, looking the picture of misery. Her face was pale and drawn—her eyelids red and swollen, and when she saw Sir Philip, she gave him a glance of the most despairing reproach and indignation. He sprang up to her.

“Any news?” he demanded.

Britta shook her head mournfully, the tears beginning to roll again down her cheeks.

“Oh, if I’d only thought!” she sobbed. “If I’d only known what the dear Fröken meant to do when she said good-bye to me last night, I could have prevented her going—I could—I would have told her all I know—and she would have stayed to see you! Oh, Sir Philip, if you had only been here, that wicked, wicked Lady Winsleigh *couldn’t* have driven her away!”

At this name such a fury filled Philip’s heart that he could barely control himself. He breathed quickly and heavily.

“What of her?” he demanded in a low, suffocated voice. “What has Lady Winsleigh to do with it, Britta?”

“Everything!” cried Britta, though, as she glanced at his set, stern face and paling lips, she began to feel a little frightened. “She has always hated the Fröken, and been jealous of her—always! Her own maid, Louise, will tell you so—Lord Winsleigh’s man, Briggs, will tell you so! They’ve listened at the doors, and they know all

about it!" Britta made this statement with the most childlike candour. "And they've heard all sorts of wicked things—Lady Winsleigh was always talking to Sir Francis Lennox about the Fröken,—and now they've made her believe you do not care for her any more—they've been trying to make her believe everything bad of you for ever so many months——" she paused, terrified at Sir Philip's increasing pallor.

"Go on, Britta," he said quietly, though his voice sounded strange to himself. Britta gathered up all her remaining stock of courage.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" she continued desperately, "I *don't* understand London people at all, and I never shall understand them! Everybody seems to want to be wicked! Briggs says that Lady Winsleigh was fond of *you*, Sir Philip,—then, that she was fond of Sir Francis Lennox,—and yet she has a husband of her own all the time! It is so very strange!" And the little maiden's perplexity appeared to border on distraction. "They would think such a woman quite mad in Norway! But what is worse than anything is that you—you, Sir Philip,—oh! I *won't* believe it," and she stamped her foot passionately, "I *can't* believe it! . . . and yet everybody says that you go to see a dreadful, painted dancing woman at the theatre, and that you like her better than the Fröken,—it *isn't* true, is it?" Here she peered anxiously at her master—but he was abso-

lutely silent. Neville made as though he would speak, but a gesture from Sir Philip's hand restrained him. Britta went on rather dispiritedly, "Anyhow, Briggs has just told me that only yesterday Lady Winsleigh went all by herself to see this actress, and that she got some letter there which she brought to the Fröken——" she recoiled suddenly with a little scream. "Oh, Sir Philip!—where are you going?"

Errington's hand came down on her shoulder, as he twisted her lightly out of his path and strode to the door.

"Sir Philip—Sir Philip!" cried Neville anxiously, hastening after him. "Think for a moment; don't do anything rash!"

Philip wrung his hand convulsively. "Rash! My good fellow, it's a *woman* who has slandered me—what *can* I do? Her sex protects her!" He gave a short, furious laugh. "But—by God!—were she a man I'd shoot her dead!"

And with these words, and his eyes blazing with wrath, he left the room. Neville and Britta confronted each other in vague alarm.

"Where will he go?" half whispered Britta.

"To Winsleigh House, I suppose," answered Neville in the same low tone.

Just then the hall-door shut with a loud bang, that echoed through the silent house.

"He's gone!" and as Neville said this he sighed and looked dubiously at his companion.

"How do you know all this about Lady Winsleigh, Britta? It may not be true—it's only servants' gossip."

"Only servants' gossip!" exclaimed Britta. "And is that nothing? Why, in these grand houses like Lord Winsleigh's, the servants know everything! Briggs makes it his business to listen at the doors—he says it's a part of his duty. And Louise opens all her mistress's letters—she says she owes it to her own respectability to know what sort of a lady it is she serves. And she's going to leave, because she says her ladyship *isn't* respectable! There! what do you think of that! And Sir Philip will find out a great deal more than even *I* have told him—but oh! I *can't* understand about that actress!" And she shook her head despairingly.

"Britta," said Neville suddenly, "That actress is my wife!"

Britta started,—and her round eyes opened wide.

"Your wife, Mr. Neville?" she exclaimed.

Neville took off his spectacles and polished them nervously.

"Yes, Britta—my wife!"

She looked at him in amazed silence. Neville went on rubbing his glasses, and continued in rather dreamy, tremulous accents—

"Yes—I lost her years ago—I thought she was dead. But I found her—on the stage of the

Brilliant Theatre. I—I never expected—*that!* I would rather she had died!” He paused and went on softly, “When I married her, Britta, she was such a dear little girl,—so bright and pretty!—and I—I fancied she was fond of me! Yes, I did,—of course, I was foolish—I’ve always been foolish, I think. And when—when I saw her on that stage I felt as if some one had struck me a hard blow—it seems as if I’d been stunned ever since. And though she knows I’m in London, she won’t see me, Britta,—she won’t let me speak to her even for a moment! It’s very hard! Sir Philip has tried his best to persuade her to see me—he has talked to her and written to her about me; and that’s not all,—he has even tried to make her come back to me—but it’s all no use—and—and that’s how all the mischief has arisen—do you see?”

Britta gazed at him still, with sympathy written on every line of her face,—but a great load had been lifted from her mind by his words—she began to understand everything.

“I’m so sorry for you, Mr. Neville!” she said. “But why didn’t you tell all this to the Fröken?”

“I *couldn’t!*” murmured Neville desperately. “She was there that night at the Brilliant,—and if you had seen how she looked when she saw—my wife—appear on the stage! So pained, so sorry, so ashamed! and she wanted to leave the

theatre at once. Of course, I ought to have told her,—I wish I had—but—somehow, I never could.” He paused again. “It’s all my stupidity, of course,—Sir Philip is quite blameless—he has been the kindest, the best of friends to me——” his voice trembled more and more, and he could not go on. There was a silence of some minutes, during which Britta appeared absorbed in meditation, and Neville furtively wiped his eyes.

Presently he spoke again more cheerfully. “It’ll soon be all right again, Britta!” and he nodded encouragingly. “Sir Philip says her ladyship has gone home to Norway, and he means to follow her to-night.”

Britta nodded gravely, but heaved a deep sigh.

“And I posted her letter to her father!” she half murmured. “Oh, if I had only thought or guessed why it was written!”

“Isn’t it rather a bad time of the year for Norway?” pursued Neville. “Why, there must be snow and darkness——”

“Snow and darkness at the Altenfjord!” suddenly cried Britta, catching at his words. “That’s exactly what she said to me the other evening! Oh dear! I never thought of it—I never remembered it was the dark season!” She clasped her hands in dismay. “There is no sun at the Altenfjord now—it is like night—and the cold is bitter! And she is not strong—not strong enough to

travel—and there's the North Sea to cross—oh, Mr. Neville!" and she broke out sobbing afresh. "The journey will kill her,—I know it will! my poor, poor darling! I must go after her—I'll go with Sir Philip—I *won't* be left behind!"

"Hush, hush, Britta!" said Neville kindly, patting her shoulder. "Don't cry—don't cry!"

But he was very near crying himself, poor man, so shaken was he by the events of the morning. And he could not help admitting to himself the possibility that so long and trying a journey for Thelma in her present condition of health meant little else than serious illness—perhaps death. The only comfort he could suggest to the disconsolate Britta was, that at that time of year it was very probable there would be no steamer running to Christiansund or Bergen, and in that case Thelma would be unable to leave England, and would, therefore, be overtaken by Sir Philip at Hull.

Meanwhile, Sir Philip himself, in a white heat of restrained anger, arrived at Winsleigh House, and asked to see Lord Winsleigh immediately. Briggs, who opened the door to him, was a little startled at his haggard face and blazing eyes, even though he knew, through Britta, all about the sorrow that had befallen him. Briggs was not surprised at Lady Errington's departure,—that portion of his "duty" which consisted in listening at doors, had greatly enlightened him on many points,—all, save one—the reported connection

between Sir Philip and Violet Vere. This seemed to be really true according to all appearances.

"Which it puzzles me," soliloquized the owner of the shapely calves. "It do, indeed. Yet I feels very much for Sir Philip,—I said to Flopsie this morning—'Flopsie, I feels for 'im!' Yes,—I used them very words. Only, of course, he shouldn't 'ave gone on with Vi. She's a fine woman certainly—but skittish—d—d skittish! I've allus made it a rule myself to avoid 'er on principle. Lor! if I'd kep' company with 'er and the likes of 'er I shouldn't be the man I am!" And he smiled complacently.

Lord Winsleigh, who was in his library as usual, occupied with his duties as tutor to his son Ernest, rose to receive Sir Philip with an air of more than his usual gravity.

"I was about to write to you, Errington," he began, and then stopped short, touched by the utter misery expressed in Philip's face. He addressed Ernest with a sort of nervous haste—

"Run away, my boy, to your own room. I'll send for you again presently."

Ernest obeyed. "Now," said Lord Winsleigh, as soon as the lad disappeared, "tell me everything, Errington! Is it true that your wife has left you?"

"Left me!" and Philip's eyes flashed with passionate anger. "No, Winsleigh!—she's been driven away from me by the vilest and most

heartless cruelty. She's been made to believe a scandalous and abominable lie against me—and she's gone! I—I—by Jove! I hardly like to say it to your face—but——”

“I understand!” a curious flicker of a smile shadowed rather than brightened Lord Winsleigh's stern features. “Pray speak quite plainly! Lady Winsleigh is to blame? I am not at all surprised!”

Errington gave him a rapid glance of wonder. He had always fancied Winsleigh to be a studious, rather dull sort of man, absorbed in books and the education of his son,—a man, more than half blind to everything that went on around him—and, moreover, one who deliberately shut his eyes to the frivolous coquetry of his wife,—and though he liked him fairly well, there had been a sort of vague contempt mingled with his liking. Now a new light was suddenly thrown on his character—there was something in his look, his manner, his very tone of voice,—which proved to Errington that there was a deep and forcible side to his nature of which his closest friends had never dreamed—and he was somewhat taken aback by the discovery. Seeing that he still hesitated, Winsleigh laid a hand encouragingly on his shoulder and said—

“I repeat—I'm not at all surprised! Nothing that Lady Winsleigh might do would cause me the slightest astonishment. She has long ceased

to be my wife, except in name,—that she still bears that name and holds the position she has in the world is simply—for my son's sake! I do not wish,"—his voice quivered slightly—"I do not wish the boy to despise his mother. It's always a bad beginning for a young man's life. I want to avoid it for Ernest, if possible,—regardless of any personal sacrifice." He paused a moment—then resumed. "Now, speak out, Errington, and plainly,—for if mischief has been done and I can repair it in any way, you may be sure I will."

Thus persuaded, Sir Philip briefly related the whole story of the misunderstanding that had arisen concerning Neville's wife, Violet Vere,—and concluded by saying—

"It is, of course, only through Britta that I've just heard about Lady Winsleigh's having anything to do with it. Her information may not be correct—I hope it isn't,—but——"

Lord Winsleigh interrupted him. "Come with me," he said composedly. "We'll resolve this difficulty at once."

He led the way out of the library across the hall. Errington followed him in silence. He knocked at the door of his wife's room,—in response to her "Come in!" they both entered. She was alone, reclining on a sofa, reading,—she started up with a pettish exclamation at sight of her husband, but observing who it was that came with him, she stood mute, the colour rushing to her cheeks with

surprise and something of fear. Yet she endeavoured to smile, and returned with her usual grace their somewhat formal salutations.

“Clara,” then said Lord Winsleigh gravely, “I have to ask you a question on behalf of Sir Philip Errington here,—a question to which it is necessary for you to give the plain answer. Did you or did you not procure this letter from Violet Vere, of the Brilliant Theatre—and did you, or did you not, give it yourself yesterday into the hands of Lady Bruce-Errington?” And he laid the letter in question, which Philip had handed to him, down upon the table before her.

She looked at it—then at him—then from him to Sir Philip, who uttered no word—and lightly shrugged her shoulders.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” she said, carelessly.

Sir Philip turned upon her indignantly.

“Lady Winsleigh, you *do* know——”

She interrupted him with a stately gesture.

“Excuse me, Sir Philip! I am not accustomed to be spoken to in this extraordinary manner. You forget yourself—my husband, I think, also forgets himself! I know nothing whatever about Violet Vere—I’m not fond of the society of actresses. Of course, I’ve heard about your admiration for her—that is common town-talk,—though my informant on this point was Sir Francis Lennox.”

"Sir Francis Lennox!" cried Philip furiously. "Thank God! there's a man to deal with! By Heaven, I'll choke him with his own lie!"

Lady Winsleigh raised her eyebrows in well-bred surprise.

"Dear me! It is a lie, then? Now, I should have thought from all accounts that it was so very likely to be true!"

Philip turned white with passion. Her sarcastic smile,—her mocking glance,—irritated him almost beyond endurance.

"Permit me to ask you, Clara," continued Lord Winsleigh calmly, "if you,—as you say, know nothing about Violet Vere, why did you go to the Brilliant Theatre yesterday morning?"

She flashed an angry glance at him.

"Why? To secure a box for the new performance. Is there anything wonderful in that?"

Her husband remained unmoved. "May I see the voucher for this box?" he inquired.

"I've sent it to some friends," replied her ladyship haughtily. "Since when have you decided to become an inquisitor, my lord?"

"Lady Winsleigh," said Philip suddenly and eagerly, "will you swear to me that you have said or done nothing to make my Thelma leave me?"

"Oh, she *has* left you, has she?" and Lady Clara smiled maliciously. "I thought she would! Why don't you ask your dear friend, George

Lorimer, about her? He is madly in love with her, as everybody knows,—she is probably the same with him!”

“Clara, Clara!” exclaimed Lord Winsleigh in accents of deep reproach. “Shame on you! Shame!”

Her ladyship laughed amusedly. “Please don’t be tragic!” she said; “it’s too ridiculous! Sir Philip has only himself to blame. Of course, Thelma knows about his frequent visits to the Brilliant Theatre. I told her all that Sir Francis said. Why should she be kept in the dark? I dare say she doesn’t mind—she’s very fond of Mr. Lorimer!”

Errington felt as though he must choke with fury. He forgot the presence of Lord Winsleigh—he forgot everything but his just indignation.

“My God!” he cried passionately. “You *dare* to speak so!—*you*!”

“Yes, I!” she returned coolly, measuring him with a glance. “I dare! What have you to say against *me*?” She drew herself up imperiously.

Then turning to her husband, she said, “Have the goodness to take your excited friend away, my lord! I am going out—I have a great many engagements this morning—and I really cannot stop to discuss this absurd affair any longer! It isn’t my fault that Sir Philip’s excessive admiration for Miss Vere has become the subject of

gossip—I don't blame him for it! He seems extremely ill-tempered about it; but, after all, '*ce n'est que la verité qui blesse!*'"

And she smiled maliciously.

CHAPTER XI.

“For my mother’s sake,
For thine and hers, O Love! I pity take
On all poor women. Jesu’s will be done,
Honour for all, and infamy for none,
This side the borders of the burning lake.”

ERIC MACKAY’S *Love-Letters of a Violinist*.

LORD WINSLEIGH did not move. Sir Philip fixed his eyes upon her in silence. Some occult fascination forced her to meet his glance, and the utter scorn of it stung her proud heart to its centre. Not that she felt much compunction—her whole soul was up in arms against him, and had been so from the very day she was first told of his unexpected marriage. His evident contempt now irritated her—she was angrier with him than ever, and yet—she had a sort of strange triumph in the petty vengeance she had designed—she had destroyed his happiness for a time, at least. If she could but shake his belief in his wife! she thought, vindictively. To that end she had thrown out her evil hint respecting Thelma’s affection for George Lorimer, but the shaft had been aimed uselessly.

Errington knew too well the stainless purity of Thelma to wrong her by the smallest doubt, and he would have staked his life on the loyalty of his friend. Presently he controlled his anger sufficiently to be able to speak, and still eyeing her with that straight, keen look of immeasurable disdain, he said in cold, deliberate accents—

“Your ladyship is in error,—the actress in question is the wife of my secretary, Mr. Neville. For years they have been estranged—my visits to her were entirely on Neville’s behalf—my letters to her were all on the same subject. Sir Francis Lennox must have known the truth all along,—Violet Vere has been his mistress for the past five years!”

He uttered the concluding words with intense bitterness. A strange, bewildered horror passed over Lady Winsleigh’s face.

“I don’t believe it,” she said rather faintly.

“Believe it or not, it is true!” he replied curtly. “Ask the manager of the Brilliant, if you doubt me. Winsleigh, it’s no use my stopping here any longer. As her ladyship refuses to give any explanation——”

“Wait a moment, Errington,” interposed Lord Winsleigh in his coldest and most methodical manner. “Her ladyship refuses—but *I* do not refuse! Her ladyship will not speak—she allows her husband to speak for her. Therefore,” and he smiled at his astonished wife somewhat sardon-

cally, "I may tell you at once, that her ladyship admits to having purchased from Violet Vere for the sum of £20, the letter which she afterwards took with her own hands to your wife." Lady Winsleigh uttered an angry exclamation.

"Don't interrupt me, Clara, if you please," he said, with an icy smile. "We have so many sympathies in common that I'm sure I shall be able to explain your unspoken meanings quite clearly." He went on, addressing himself to Errington, who stood utterly amazed.

"Her ladyship desires me to assure you that her only excuse for her action in this matter is, that she fully believed the reports her friend, Sir Francis Lennox, gave her concerning your supposed intimacy with the actress in question,—and that, believing it, she made use of it as much as possible for the purpose of destroying your wife's peace of mind and confidence in you. Her object was most purely feminine—love of mischief, and the gratification of private spite! There's nothing like frankness!" and Lord Winsleigh's face was a positive study as he spoke. "You see,"—he made a slight gesture towards his wife, who stood speechless, and so pale that her very lips were colourless—"her ladyship is not in a position to deny what I have said. Excuse her silence!"

And again he smiled—that smile as glitteringly chill as a gleam of light on the edge of a sword.

Lady Winsleigh raised her head, and her eyes met his with a dark expression of the uttermost anger.

“Spy!” she hissed between her teeth,—then without further word or gesture, she swept haughtily away into her dressing-room, which adjoined the boudoir, and closed the door of communication, thus leaving the two men alone together.

Errington felt himself to be in a most painful and awkward position. If there was anything he more than disliked, it was a *scene*—particularly of a domestic nature. And he had just had a glimpse into Lord and Lady Winsleigh’s married life, which, to him was decidedly unpleasant. He could not understand how Lord Winsleigh had become cognizant of all he had so frankly stated—and then, why had he not told him everything at first, without waiting to declare it in his wife’s presence? Unless, indeed, he wished to shame her? There was evidently something in the man’s disposition and character that he, Philip, could not as yet comprehend,—something that certainly puzzled him, and filled him with vague uneasiness.

“Winsleigh, I’m awfully sorry this has happened,” he began hurriedly, holding out his hand.

Lord Winsleigh grasped it cordially. “My dear fellow, so am I! Heartily sorry! I have to be sorry for a good many things rather often. But I’m specially grieved to think that your beautiful and innocent young wife is the victim in

this case. Unfortunately I was told nothing till this morning, otherwise I might possibly have prevented all your unhappiness. But I trust it won't be of long duration. Here's this letter," he returned it as he spoke, "which in more than one way has cost so large a price. Possibly her ladyship may now regret her ill-gotten purchase."

"Pardon me," said Errington curiously, "but how did you know——"

"The information was pressed upon me very much," replied Lord Winsleigh evasively, "and from such a source that up to the last moment I almost refused to believe it." He paused, and then went on with a forced smile, "Suppose we don't talk any more about it, Errington? The subject's rather painful to me. Only allow me to ask your pardon for my wife's share in the mischief!"

Something in his manner of speaking affected Sir Philip.

"Upon my soul, Winsleigh," he exclaimed with sudden fervour, "I fancy you're a man greatly wronged!"

Lord Winsleigh smiled slightly. "You only *fancy*?" he said quietly. "Well,—my good friend, we all have our troubles—I dare say mine are no greater than those of many better men." He stopped short, then asked abruptly, "I suppose you'll see Lennox?"

Errington set his teeth hard. "I shall,—at

once!" he replied. "And I shall probably thrash him within an inch of his life!"

"That's right! I shan't be sorry!" and Lord Winsleigh's hand clenched almost unconsciously. "I hope you understand, Errington, that if it hadn't been for my son, I should have shot that fellow long ago. I dare say you wonder,—and some others too,—why I haven't done it. But Ernest—poor little chap! . . . he would have heard of it,—and the reason of it,—his young life is involved in mine—why should I bequeath him a dishonoured mother's name? There—for heaven's sake, don't let me make a fool of myself!" and he fiercely dashed his hand across his eyes. "A duel or a divorce—or a horsewhipping—they all come to pretty much the same thing—all involve public scandal for the name of the woman who may be unhappily concerned—and scandal clings, like the stain on Lady Macbeth's hand. In your case you can act—*your* wife is above a shadow of suspicion—but I—oh, my God! how much women have to answer for in the miseries of this world!"

Errington said nothing. Pity and respect for the man before him held him silent. Here was one of the martyrs of modern social life—a man who evidently knew himself to be dishonoured by his wife,—and who yet, for the sake of his son, submitted to be daily broken on the wheel of private torture rather than let the boy grow up to despise and slight his mother. Whether he were judged

as wise or weak in his behaviour there was surely something noble about him—something unselfish and heroic that deserved recognition. Presently Lord Winsleigh continued in calmer tones—

“I’ve been talking too much about myself, Errington, I fear—forgive it! Sometimes I’ve thought you misunderstood me——”

“I never shall again!” declared Philip earnestly.

Lord Winsleigh met his look of sympathy with one of gratitude.

“Thanks!” he said briefly,—and with this they shook hands again heartily, and parted. Lord Winsleigh saw his visitor to the door—and then at once returned to his wife’s apartments. She was still absent from the boudoir—he therefore entered her dressing-room without ceremony.

There he found her,—alone, kneeling on the floor, her head buried in an arm-chair,—and her whole frame shaken with convulsive sobs. He looked down upon her with a strange wistful pain in his eyes,—pain mingled with compassion.

“Clara!” he said gently. She started and sprang up—confronting him with flushed cheeks and wet eyes.

“*You* here?” she exclaimed angrily. “I wonder you dare to——” she broke off, confused by his keen, direct glance.

“It is a matter for wonder,” he said quietly. “It’s the strangest thing in the world that I—your husband—should venture to intrude myself

into your presence! Nothing could be more out of the common. But I have something to say to you—something which must be said sooner or later—and I may as well speak now.’

He paused,—she was silent, looking at him in a sort of sudden fear.

“Sit down,” he continued in the same even tones. “You must have a little patience with me—I’ll endeavour to be as brief as possible.”

Mechanically she obeyed him and sank into a low fauteuil. She began playing with the trinkets on her silver chatelaine, and endeavoured to feign the most absolute unconcern, but her heart beat quickly—she could not imagine what was coming next—her husband’s manner and tone were quite new to her.

“You accused me just now,” he went on, “of being a spy. I have never condescended to act such a part towards you, Clara. When I first married you I trusted you with my life, my honour, and my name, and though you have betrayed all three”—she moved restlessly as his calm gaze remained fixed on her—“I repeat,—though you have betrayed all three,—I have deliberately shut my eyes to the ruin of my hopes, in a loyal endeavour to shield you from the world’s calumny. Regarding the unhappiness you have caused the Erringtons,—your own maid Louise Rénaud (who has given you notice of her intention to leave you) told me all she knew of

your share in what I may call positive cruelty, towards a happy and innocent woman who has never injured you, and whose friend you declared yourself to be——”

“You believe the lies of a servant?” suddenly cried Lady Winsleigh wrathfully.

“Have not *you* believed the lies of Sir Francis Lennox, who is less honest than a servant?” asked her husband, his grave voice deepening with a thrill of passion. “And haven’t you reported them everywhere as truths? But as regards your maid—I doubted her story altogether. She assured me she knew what money you took out with you yesterday, and what you returned with—and as the only place you visited in the morning was the Brilliant Theatre,—after having received a telegram from Lennox, which she saw,—it was easy for her to put two and two together, especially as she noticed you reading the letter you had purchased—moreover”—he paused—“she has heard certain conversations between you and Sir Francis, notably one that took place at the garden-party in summer at Errington Manor. Spy? you say? your detective has been paid by you,—fed and kept about your own person,—to minister to your vanity and to flatter your pride—that she has turned informer against you is not surprising. Be thankful that her information has fallen into no more malignant hands than mine!”

Again he paused—she was still silent—but her lips trembled nervously.

“And yet I was loth to believe everything”—he resumed half sadly—“till Errington came and showed me that letter and told me the whole story of his misery. Even then I thought I would give you one more chance—that’s why I brought him to you and asked you the question before him. One look at your face told me you were guilty, though you denied it. I should have been better pleased had you confessed it! But why talk about it any longer?—the mischief is done—I trust it is not irreparable. I certainly consider that before troubling that poor girl’s happiness,—you should have taken the precaution to inquire a little further into the truth of the reports you heard from Sir Francis Lennox,—he is not a reliable authority on any question whatsoever. You may have thought him so——” he stopped short and regarded her with sorrowful sternness—“I say, Clara, you may have thought him so, once—but *now*? Are you proud to have shared his affections with—Violet Vere?”

She uttered a sharp cry and covered her face with her hands,—an action which appeared to smite her husband to the heart,—for his voice trembled with deep feeling when he next spoke.

“Ah, best hide it, Clara!” he said passionately. “Hide that fair face I loved so well—hide those eyes in which I dreamed of finding my life’s sun-

shine! Clara, Clara! What can I say to you, fallen rose of womanhood? How can I——” he suddenly bent over her as though to caress her, then drew back with a quick, agonized sigh. “You thought me blind, Clara! . . .” he went on in low tones, “blind to my own dishonour—blind to your faithlessness;—I tell you if you had taken my heart between your hands and wrung the blood out of it drop by drop, I could not have suffered more than I have done! Why have I been silent so long?—no matter why,—but *now*, now Clara,—this life of ours must end!”

She shuddered away from him.

“End it then!” she muttered in a choked voice. “You can do as you like,—you can divorce me.”

“Yes,” said Lord Winsleigh musingly. “I can divorce you! There will be no defence possible,—as you know. If witnesses are needed, they are to be had in the persons of our own domestics. The co-respondent in the case will not refute the charge against him,—and I, the plaintiff, *must* win my just cause. Do you realize it all, Clara? You, the well-known leader of a large social circle—you, the proud beauty and envied lady of rank and fashion,—you will be made a subject for the coarse jests of lawyers,—the very judge on the bench will probably play off his stale witticisms at your expense,—your dearest friends will tear your name to shreds,—the newspapers will reek of your

doings,—and honest housemaids reading of your fall from your high estate will thank God that their souls and bodies are more chaste than yours! And last,—not least,—think when old age creeps on and your beauty withers,—think of your son grown to manhood,—the sole heir to my name,—think of him as having but one thing to blush for—the memory of his dishonoured mother!”

“Cruel—cruel!” she cried, endeavouring to check her sobs, and withdrawing her hands from her face. “Why do you say such things to me? Why did you marry me?”

He caught her hands and held them in a fast grip.

“Why? Because I loved you, Clara—loved you with all the tenderness of a strong man’s heart! When I first saw you, you seemed to me the very incarnation of maiden purity and loveliness! The days of our courtship—the first few months of our marriage—what they were to you, I know not,—to me they were supreme happiness. When our boy was born, my adoration, my reverence for you increased—you were so sacred in my eyes that I could have knelt and asked a benediction from these little hands”—here he gently loosened them from his clasp. “Then came the change—*what* changed you, I cannot imagine—it has always seemed to me unnatural, monstrous, incredible! There was no falling away in *my* affection, that I can swear! My curse upon the

man who turned your heart from mine! So rightful and deep a curse is it that I feel it must some day strike home."

He paused and seemed to reflect. "Who is there more vile, more traitorous than he?" he went on. "Has he not tried to influence Errington's wife against her husband? For what base purpose? But Clara,—he is powerless against *her* purity and innocence;—what, in the name of God, gave him power over *you*?"

She drooped her head, and the hot blood rushed to her face.

"You've said enough!" she murmured sullenly. "If you have decided on a divorce, pray carry out your intention with the least possible delay. I cannot talk any more! I—I am tired!"

"Clara," said her husband solemnly, with a strange light in his eyes, "I would rather kill you than divorce you!"

There was something so terribly earnest in his tone that her heart beat fast with fear.

"Kill me?—kill me?" she gasped, with white lips.

"Yes!" he repeated, "kill you,—as a Frenchman or an Italian would,—and take the consequences. Yes—though an Englishman, I would rather do this than drag your frail poor womanhood through the mire of public scandal! I have, perhaps, a strange nature, but such as I am, I am. There are too many of our high-born families

already, flaunting their immorality and low licentiousness in the face of the mocking, grinning populace,—I for one could never make up my mind to fling the honour of my son's mother to them, as though it were a bone for dogs to fight over. No—I have another proposition to make to you——” He stopped short. She stared at him wonderingly. He resumed in methodical, unmoved, business-like tones.

“I propose, Clara, simply,—to leave you! I'll take the boy and absent myself from this country, so as to give you perfect freedom and save you all trouble. There'll be no possibility of scandal, for I will keep you cognizant of my movements,—and should you require my presence at any time for the sake of appearances,—or—to shield you from calumny,—you may rely on my returning to you at once, without delay. Ernest will gain many advantages by travel,—his education is quite a sufficient motive for my departure, my interest in his young life being well known to all our circle. Moreover, with me—under my surveillance—he need never know anything against—against you. I have always taught him to honour and obey you in his heart.”

Lord Winsleigh paused a moment—then went on somewhat musingly;—“When he was quite little, he used to wonder why you didn't love him,—it was hard for me to hear him say that, sometimes. But I always told him that you did love

him—but that you had so many visits to make and so many friends to entertain that you had no time to play with him. I don't think he quite understood,—but still—I did my best!”

He was silent. She had hidden her face again in her hands, and he heard a sound of smothered sobbing.

“I think,” he continued calmly, “that he has a great reverence for you in his young heart—a feeling which partakes, perhaps, more of fear than love—still it is better than—disdain—or—or disrespect. I shall always teach him to esteem you highly,—but I think, as matters stand—if I relieve you of all your responsibilities to husband and son—you—Clara!—pray don't distress yourself—there's no occasion for this—Clara!——”

For on a sudden impulse she had flung herself at his feet in an irrepressible storm of passionate weeping.

“Kill me, Harry!” she sobbed wildly, clinging to him. “Kill me! don't speak to me like this!—don't leave me! Oh, my God! don't, don't despise me so utterly! Hate me—curse me—strike me—do anything, but don't leave me as if I were some low thing, unfit for your touch,—I know I am, but oh, Harry! . . .” She clung to him more closely. “If you leave me I will not live,—I cannot! Have you no pity? Why would you throw me back alone—all, all alone, to die of your contempt and my shame!”

And she bowed her head in an agony of tears.

He looked down upon her for a moment in silence.

"Your shame!" he murmured. "My wife——"

Then he raised her in his arms and drew her with a strange hesitation of touch, to his breast, as though she were some sick or wounded child, and watched her as she lay there weeping, her face hidden, her whole frame trembling in his embrace.

"Poor soul!" he whispered, more to himself than to her. "Poor frail woman! Hush, hush, Clara! The past is past! I'll make you no more reproaches. I—I *can't* hurt you, because I once so loved you—but now—now,—what *is* there left for me to do, but to leave you? You'll be happier so—you'll have perfect liberty—you needn't even think of me—unless, perhaps, as one dead and buried long ago——"

She raised herself in his arms and looked at him piteously.

"Won't you give me a chance?" she sobbed. "Not one? If I had but known you better—if I had understood—oh, I've been vile, wicked, deceitful—but I'm not happy, Harry—I've never been happy since I wronged you! Won't you give me one little hope that I may win your love again,—no, not your love,—but your pity? Oh, Harry, have I lost all—all——"

Her voice broke—she could say no more.

He stroked her hair gently. “You speak on impulse just now, Clara,” he said gravely yet tenderly. “You can’t know your own strength or weakness. God forbid that *I* should judge you harshly! As you wish it, I will not leave you yet. I’ll wait. Whether we part or remain together, shall be decided by your own actions, your own looks, your own words. You understand, Clara? You know my feelings. I’m content for the present to place my fate in your hands.” He smiled rather sadly. “But for love, Clara—I fear nothing can be done to warm to life this poor perished love of ours. We can, perhaps, take hands and watch its corpse patiently together and say how sorry we are it is dead—such penitence comes always too late!”

He sighed, and put her gently away from him.

She turned up her flushed, tear-stained face to his.

“Will you kiss me, Harry?” she asked tremblingly.

He met her eyes, and an exclamation that was almost a groan broke from his lips. A shudder passed through his frame.

“I can’t, Clara! I can’t!—God forgive me!—Not yet!” And with that he bowed his head and left her.

She listened to the echo of his firm footsteps dying away, and creeping guiltily to a side-door

she opened it, and watched yearningly his retreating figure till it had disappeared.

“Why did I never love him till now?” she murmured sobbingly. “Now, when he despises me—when he will not even kiss me?——” She leaned against the half-open door in an attitude of utter dejection, not caring to move, listening intently with a vague hope of hearing her husband’s returning tread. A lighter step than his, however, came suddenly along from the other side of the passage and startled her a little—it was Ernest, looking the picture of boyish health and beauty. He was just going out for his usual ride—he lifted his cap with pretty courtesy as he saw her, and said—

“Good-morning, mother!”

She looked at him with new interest,—how handsome the lad was!—how fresh his face!—how joyously clear those bright blue eyes of his! He, on his part, was moved by a novel sensation too—his mother,—his proud, beautiful, careless mother had been crying—he saw that at a glance, and his young heart beat faster when she laid her white hand, sparkling all over with rings, on his arm and drew him closer to her.

“Are you going to the Park?” she asked gently.

“Yes.” Then recollecting his training in politeness and obedience he added instantly—
“Unless you want me.”

She smiled faintly. "I never do want you—do I, Ernest?" she asked half sadly. "I never want my boy at all." Her voice quivered,—and Ernest grew more and more astonished.

"If you do, I'll stay," he said stoutly, filled with a chivalrous desire to console this so suddenly tender mother of his, whatever her griefs might be. Her eyes filled again, but she tried to laugh.

"No dear—not now,—run along and enjoy yourself. Come to me when you return—I shall be at home all day. And,—stop! Ernest—won't you kiss me?"

The boy opened his eyes wide in respectful wonderment, and his cheeks flushed with surprise and pleasure.

"Why, mother—of course!" And his fresh, sweet lips closed on hers with frank and unaffected heartiness. She held him fast for a moment and looked at him earnestly.

"Tell your father you kissed me—will you?" she said. "Don't forget!"

And with that she waved her hand to him, and retreated again into her own apartment. The boy went on his way somewhat puzzled and bewildered—did his mother love him, after all? If so, he thought—how glad he was!—how very glad! and what a pity he had not known it before!

CHAPTER XII.

“I heed not custom, creed, nor law ;
I care for nothing that ever I saw—
I terribly laugh with an oath and sneer,
When I think that the hour of Death draws near !”

W. WINTER.

ERRINGTON'S first idea, on leaving Winsleigh House, was to seek an interview with Sir Francis Lennox, and demand an explanation. He could not understand the man's motive for such detestable treachery and falsehood. His anger rose to a white heat as he thought of it, and he determined to “have it out” with him whatever the consequences might be. “No apology will serve his turn,” he muttered. “The scoundrel ! He has lied deliberately—and, by Jove, he shall pay for it !”

And he started off rapidly in the direction of Piccadilly, but on the way he suddenly remembered that he had no weapon with him, not even a cane wherewith to carry out his intention of thrashing Sir Francis, and calling to mind a

certain heavy horsewhip, that hung over the mantel-piece in his own room, he hailed a hansom, and was driven back to his house in order to provide himself with that implement of castigation before proceeding further. On arriving at the door, to his surprise he found Lorimer who was just about to ring the bell.

"Why, I thought you were in Paris?" he exclaimed.

"I came back last night," George began, when Morris opened the door, and Errington, taking his friend by the arm hurried him into the house. In five minutes he had unburdened himself of all his troubles—and had explained the misunderstanding about Violet Vere, and Thelma's consequent flight. Lorimer listened with a look of genuine pain and distress on his honest face.

"Phil, you *have* been a fool!" he said candidly. "A positive fool, if you'll pardon me for saying so. You ought to have told Thelma everything at first,—she's the very last woman in the world who ought to be kept in the dark about anything. Neville's feelings? Bother Neville's feelings! Depend upon it the poor girl has heard all manner of stories. She's been miserable for some time—Duprèz noticed it." And he related in a few words the little scene that had taken place at Errington Manor on the night of the garden-party, when his playing on the organ had moved her to such unwonted emotion.

Philip heard him in moody silence,—how had it happened, he wondered, that others,—comparative strangers,—had observed that Thelma looked unhappy, while he, her husband, had been blind to it? He could not make this out,—and yet it is a thing that very commonly happens. Our nearest and dearest are often those who are most in the dark respecting our private and personal sufferings,—we do not wish to trouble them,—and they prefer to think that everything is right with us, even though the rest of the world can plainly perceive that everything is wrong. To the last moment they will refuse to see death in our faces, though the veriest stranger meeting us casually, clearly beholds the shadow of the dark Angel's hand.

“*Apropos* of Lennox,” went on Lorimer, sympathetically watching his friend, “I came on purpose to speak to you about him. I’ve got some news for you. He’s a regular sneak and scoundrel. You can thrash him to your heart’s content—for he has grossly insulted your wife.”

“*Insulted* her?” cried Errington furiously. “How,—what——”

“Give me time to speak!” And George laid a restraining hand on his arm. “Thelma visited my mother yesterday and told her that on the night before, when you had gone out, Lennox took advantage of your absence to come here and make love to her,—and she actually had to struggle with

him, and even to strike him, in order to release herself from his advances. My mother advised her to tell you about it—and she evidently then had no intention of flight, for she said she would inform you of everything as soon as you returned from the country. And if Lady Winsleigh hadn't interfered, it's very probable that—— I say, where are you going?" This as Philip made a bound for the door.

"To get my horsewhip!" he answered.

"All right—I approve!" cried Lorimer. "But wait one instant, and see how clear the plot becomes. Thelma's beauty has maddened Lennox,—to gain her good opinion, as he thinks, he throws his mistress, Violet Vere, on *your* shoulders—(your ingenuous visits to the Brilliant Theatre gave him a capital pretext for this) and as for Lady Winsleigh's share in the mischief, it's nothing but mere feminine spite against you for marrying at all, and hatred of the woman whose life is such a contrast to her own, and who absorbs all your affection. Lennox has used her as his tool and the Vere also, I've no doubt. The thing's as clear as crystal. It's a sort of general misunderstanding all round—one of those eminently unpleasant trifles that very frequently upset the peace and comfort of the most quiet and inoffensive persons. But the fault lies with *you*, dear old boy!"

"With *me*!" exclaimed Philip.

"Certainly! Thelma's soul is as open as day-

light—you shouldn't have had any secret from her, however trifling. She's not a woman 'on guard,'—she can't take life as the most of us do, in military fashion, with ears pricked for the approach of a spy, and prepared to expect betrayal from her most familiar friends. She accepts things as they appear, without any suspicion of mean ulterior designs. It's a pity, of course!—it's a pity she can't be worldly-wise, and scheme and plot and plan and lie like the rest of us! However, *your* course is plain—first interview Lennox and then follow Thelma. She can't have left Hull yet,—there are scarcely any boats running to Norway at this season. You'll overtake her I'm certain."

"By Jove, Lorimer!" said Errington suddenly. "Clara Winsleigh sticks at nothing—do you know she actually had the impudence to suggest that *you*,—you, of all people,—were in love with Thelma!"

Lorimer flushed up, but laughed lightly. "How awfully sweet of her! Much obliged to her, I'm sure! And how did you take it Phil?"

"Take it? I didn't take it at all," responded Philip warmly. "Of course, I knew it was only her spite—she'd say anything in one of her tempers."

Lorimer looked at him with a sudden tenderness in his blue eyes. Then he laughed again, a little forcedly, and said—

“Be off, old man, and get that whip of yours! We’ll run Lennox to earth. Hullo! here’s Britta!”

The little maid entered hurriedly at that moment,—she came to ask with quivering lips, whether she might accompany Sir Philip in his intended journey to Norway.

“For if you do not find the Fröken at Hull, you will want to reach the Altenfjord,” said Britta, folding her hands resolutely in front of her apron, “and you will not get on without me. You do not know what the country is like in the depth of winter when the sun is asleep. You must have the reindeer to help you—and no Englishman knows how to drive reindeer. And—and—” here Britta’s eyes filled—“you have not thought, perhaps, that the journey may make the Fröken very ill—and that when we find her—she may be—dying——” and Britta’s strength gave way in a big sob that broke from the depths of her honest, affectionate heart.

“Don’t—*don’t* talk like that, Britta!” cried Philip passionately. “I can’t bear it! Of course, you shall go with me! I wouldn’t leave you behind for the world! Get everything ready——” and in a fever of heat and impatience he began rumaging among some books on a side-shelf, till he found the time-tables he sought. “Yes,—here we are,—there’s a train leaving for Hull at five—we’ll take that. Tell Morris to pack my port-

manteau, and you bring it along with you to the Midland railway-station this afternoon. Do you understand?"

Britta nodded emphatically, and hurried off at once to busy herself with these preparations, while Philip, all excitement, dashed off to give a few parting injunctions to Neville, and to get his horsewhip.

Lorimer, left alone for a few minutes, seated himself in an easy chair and began absently turning over the newspapers on the table. But his thoughts were far away, and presently he covered his eyes with one hand as though the light hurt them. When he removed it, his lashes were wet.

"What a fool I am!" he muttered impatiently. "Oh Thelma, Thelma! my darling!—how I wish I could follow and find you and console you!—you poor, tender, resigned soul, going away like this because you thought you were not wanted—not wanted!—my God!—if you only knew how one man at least has wanted and yearned for you ever since he saw your sweet face!—Why can't I tear you out of my heart—why can't I love some one else? Ah Phil!—good, generous, kind old Phil!—he little guesses," he rose and paced the room up and down restlessly. "The fact is I oughtn't to be here at all—I ought to leave England altogether for a long time—till—till I get over it. The question is, *shall* I ever get over it? Sigurd was a wise boy—he found a short way out of all his

troubles,—suppose I imitate his example? No,—for a man in his senses that would be rather cowardly—though it might be pleasant!” He stopped in his walk with a pondering expression on his face. “At any rate, I won’t stop here to see her come back—I couldn’t trust myself,—I should say something foolish—I know I should! I’ll take my mother to Italy—she wants to go; and we’ll stay with Lovelace. It’ll be a change—and I’ll have a good stand-up fight with myself, and see if I can’t come off the conqueror somehow! It’s all very well to kill an opponent in battle—but the question is, can a man kill his inner, grumbling, discontented, selfish Self? If he can’t, what’s the good of him?”

As he was about to consider this point reflectively, Errington entered, equipped for travelling, and whip in hand. His imagination had been at work during the past few minutes, exaggerating all the horrors and difficulties of Thelma’s journey to the Altenfjord, till he was in a perfect fever of irritable excitement.

“Come on Lorimer!” he cried. “There’s no time to lose! Britta knows what to do—she’ll meet me at the station. I can’t breathe in this wretched house a moment longer—let’s be off!”

Plunging out into the hall, he bade Morris summon a hansom,—and with a few last instructions to that faithful servitor, and an encouraging kind word and shake of the hand to Neville, who

with a face of remorseful misery, stood at the door to watch his departure, — he was gone. The hansom containing him and Lorimer rattled rapidly towards the abode of Sir Francis Lennox, but on entering Piccadilly, the vehicle was compelled to go so slowly on account of the traffic, that Errington, who every moment grew more and more impatient, could not stand it.

“By Jove! this is like a walking funeral!” he muttered. “I say Lorimer, let’s get out! We can do the rest on foot.”

They stopped the cabman and paid him his fare — then hurried along rapidly, Errington every now and then giving a fiercer clench to the formidable horsewhip which was twisted together with his ordinary walking-stick in such a manner as not to attract special attention.

“Coward and liar!” he muttered, as he thought of the man he was about to punish. “He shall pay for his dastardly falsehood—by Jove he shall! It’ll be a precious long time before he shows himself in society any more!”

Then he addressed Lorimer. “You may depend upon it he’ll shout ‘police! police!’ and make for the door,” he observed. “You keep your back against it Lorimer! I don’t care how many fines I’ve got to pay as long as I can thrash him soundly!”

“All right!” Lorimer answered, and they quickened their pace. As they neared the

chambers which Sir Francis Lennox rented over a fashionable jeweller's shop, they became aware of a small procession coming straight towards them from the opposite direction. *Something* was being carried between four men who appeared to move with extreme care and gentleness,—this something was surrounded by a crowd of boys and men whose faces were full of morbid and frightened interest—the whole *cortége* was headed by a couple of solemn policemen. “You spoke of a walking funeral just now,” said Lorimer suddenly. “This looks uncommonly like one.”

Errington made no reply—he had only one idea in his mind,—the determination to chastise and thoroughly disgrace Sir Francis. “I’ll hound him out of the Clubs!” he thought indignantly. “His own set shall know what a liar he is—and if I can help it he shall never hold up his head again!”

Entirely occupied as he was with these reflections, he paid no heed to anything that was going on in the street, and he scarcely heard Lorimer's last observation. So that he was utterly surprised and taken aback, when he, with Lorimer, was compelled to come to a halt before the very door of the jeweller, Lennox's landlord, while the two policemen cleared a passage through the crowd, saying in low tones, “Stand aside, gentlemen, please!—stand aside,” thus making gradual way for four bearers, who, as was now plainly to

be seen, carried a common wooden stretcher covered with a cloth, under which lay what seemed, from its outline, to be a human figure.

"What's the matter here?" asked Lorimer, with a curious cold thrill running through him as he put the simple question.

One of the policemen answered readily enough.

"An accident, sir. Gentleman badly hurt. Down at Charing Cross Station—tried to jump into a train when it had started,—foot caught,—was thrown under the wheels and dragged along some distance—doctor says he can't live, sir."

"Who is he,—what's his name?"

"Lennox, sir—leastways, that's the name on his card—and this is the address. Sir Francis Lennox, I believe it is."

Errington uttered a sharp exclamation of horror,—at that moment the jeweller came out of the recesses of his shop with uplifted hands and bewildered countenance.

"An accident? Good Heavens!—Sir Francis! Upstairs!—take him upstairs!" Here he addressed the bearers. "You should have gone round to the private entrance—he mustn't be seen in the shop—frightening away all my customers—here, pass through!—pass through, as quick as you can!"

And they did pass through,—carrying their crushed burden tenderly along by the shining glass cases and polished counters, where glim-

mered and flashed jewels of every size and lustre for the adorning of the children of this world,—slowly and carefully, step by step, they reached the upper floor,—and there, in a luxurious apartment furnished with almost feminine elegance, they lifted the inanimate form from the stretcher and laid it down, still shrouded, on a velvet sofa, removing the last number of *Truth*, and two of Zola's novels, to make room for the heavy, unconscious head.

Errington and Lorimer stood at the doorway, completely overcome by the suddenness of the event—they had followed the bearers upstairs almost mechanically,—exchanging no word or glance by the way,—and now they watched in almost breathless suspense while a surgeon who was present, gently turned back the cover that hid the injured man's features and exposed them to full view. Was *that* Sir Francis? that blood-smeared, mangled creature?—*that* the lascivious dandy,—the disciple of no-creed and self-worship? Errington shuddered and averted his gaze from that hideous face,—so horribly contorted,—yet otherwise deathlike in its rigid stillness. There was a grave hush. The surgeon still bent over him—touching here, probing there, with tenderness and skill,—but finally he drew back with a hopeless shake of his head.

“Nothing can be done,” he whispered. “Absolutely nothing!”

At that moment Sir Francis stirred,—he groaned and opened his eyes;—what terrible eyes they were, filled with that look of intense anguish, and something worse than anguish,—fear—frantic fear—coward fear—fear that was almost more overpowering than his bodily suffering.

He stared wildly at the little group assembled—strange faces, so far as he could make them out, that regarded him with evident compassion,—what—what was all this—what did it mean? Death? No, no! he thought madly, while his brain reeled with the idea—death? What *was* death?—darkness, annihilation, blackness—all that was horrible—unimaginable! God! he would *not* die! God!—who *was* God? No matter—he would live;—he would struggle against this heaviness,—this coldness—this pillar of ice in which he was being slowly frozen—frozen—frozen!—inch by inch! He made a furious effort to move, and uttered a scream of agony, stabbed through and through by torturing pain.

“Keep still!” said the surgeon pityingly.

Sir Francis heard him not. He wrestled with his bodily anguish till the perspiration stood in large drops on his forehead. He raised himself, gasping for breath, and glared about him like a trapped beast of prey.

“Give me brandy!” he muttered chokingly. “Quick—quick! Are you going to let me die like a dog?—damn you all!”

The effort to move,—to speak,—exhausted his sinking strength—his throat rattled,—he clenched his fists and made as though he would spring off his couch—when a fearful contortion convulsed his whole body,—his eyes rolled up and became fixed—he fell heavily back,—*dead!*

Quietly the surgeon covered again what was now nothing,—nothing but a mutilated corpse.

“It’s all over!” he announced briefly.

Errington heard these words in sickened silence. All over! Was it possible? So soon? All over!—and he had come too late to punish the would-be ravisher of his wife’s honour,—too late! He still held the whip in his hand with which he had meant to chastise that—that distorted, mangled lump of clay yonder, . . . pah! he could not bear to think of it, and he turned away, faint and dizzy. He felt,—rather than saw the staircase,—down which he dreamily went, followed by Lorimer.

The two policemen were in the hall scribbling the cut-and-dry particulars of the accident in their note-books, which having done, they marched off, attended by a wandering, bilious-looking penny-a-liner who was anxious to write a successful account of the “Shocking Fatality,” as it was called in the next day’s newspapers. Then the bearers departed cheerfully, carrying with them the empty stretcher. Then the jeweller, who seemed quite unmoved respecting

the sudden death of his lodger, chatted amicably with the surgeon about the reputation and various *de-merits* of the deceased,—and Errington and Lorimer, as they passed through the shop, heard him speaking of a person hitherto unheard of, namely, Lady Francis Lennox, who had been deserted by her husband for the past six years, and who was living uncomplainingly the life of an art-student in Germany with her married sister, maintaining, by the work of her own hands, her one little child, a boy of five.

“He never allowed her a farthing,” said the conversational jeweller. “And she never asked him for one. Mr. Wiggins, his lawyer—firm of Wiggins and Whizzer, Furnival’s Inn,—told me all about his affairs. Oh yes—he was a regular “masher”—tip-top! Not worth much, I should say. He must have spent over a thousand a year in keeping up that little place at St. John’s Wood for Violet Vere. He owes me five hundred. However, Mr. Wiggins will see everything fair, I’ve no doubt. I’ve just wired to him, announcing the death. I don’t suppose any one will regret him—except, perhaps, the woman at St. John’s Wood. But I believe she’s playing for a bigger stake just now.” And, stimulated by this thought, he drew out from a handsome morocco case a superb pendant of emeralds and diamonds—a work of art, that glittered as he displayed it, like a star on a frosty night.

“Pretty thing, isn’t it?” he said proudly. “Eight hundred pounds, and cheap, too! It was ordered for Miss Vere, two months ago, by the Duke of Moorlands. I see he sold his collection of pictures the other day. Luckily they fetched a tidy sum, so I’m pretty sure of the money for this. He’ll sell everything he’s got to please her. Queer? Oh, not at all! She’s the rage just now,—I can’t see anything in her myself,—but I’m not a duke, you see—I’m obliged to be respectable!”

He laughed as he returned the pendant to its nest of padded amber satin, and Errington,—sick at heart to hear such frivolous converse going on while that crushed and lifeless form lay in the very room above,—unwatched, uncared-for,—put his arm through Lorimer’s and left the shop.

Once in the open street, with the keen, cold air blowing against their faces, they looked at each other blankly. Piccadilly was crowded; the hurrying people passed and repassed,—there were the shouts of omnibus conductors and newsboys—the laughter of young men coming out of the St. James’s Hall Restaurant; all was as usual,—as, indeed, why should it not? What matters the death of one man in a million? unless, indeed, it be a man whose life, like a torch uplifted in darkness, has enlightened and cheered the world,—but the death of a mere fashionable “swell” whose chief talent has been a trick of lying gracefully—who cares for such a one? Society is instinctively

relieved to hear that his place is empty, and shall know him more. But Errington could not immediately forget the scene he had witnessed. He was overcome by sensations of horror,—even of pity,—and he walked by his friend's side for some time in silence.

“I wish I could get rid of this thing!” he said suddenly, looking down at the horsewhip in his hand.

Lorimer made no answer. He understood his feeling, and realized the situation as sufficiently grim. To be armed with a weapon meant for the chastisement of a man whom Death had so suddenly claimed was, to say the least of it, unpleasant. Yet the horsewhip could scarcely be thrown away in Piccadilly—such an action might attract notice and comment. Presently Philip spoke again.

“He was actually married all the time!”

“So it seems;” and Lorimer's face expressed something very like contempt. “By Jove, Phil! he must have been an awful scoundrel!”

“Don't let's say any more about him—he's dead!” and Philip quickened his steps. “And what a horrible death!”

“Horrible enough, indeed!”

Again they were both silent. Mechanically they turned down towards Pall Mall.

“George,” said Errington, with a strange awe in his tones, “it seems to me to-day as if there were death in the air. I don't believe in pre-

sentiments, but yet—yet I cannot help thinking—what if I should find my Thelma—*dead*?”

Lorimer turned very pale—a cold shiver ran through him, but he endeavoured to smile.

“For God’s sake, old fellow, don’t think of anything so terrible! Look here, you’re hipped—no wonder! and you’ve got a long journey before you. Come and have lunch. It’s just two o’clock. Afterwards we’ll go to the Garrick and have a chat with Beau Lovelace—he’s a first-rate fellow for looking on the bright side of everything. Then I’ll see you off this afternoon at the Midland—what do you say?”

Errington assented to this arrangement, and tried to shake off the depression that had settled upon him, though dark forebodings passed one after the other like clouds across his mind. He seemed to see the Altenguard hills stretching drearily, white with frozen snow, around the black Fjord; he pictured Thelma, broken-hearted, fancying herself deserted, returning through the cold and darkness to the lonely farm-house behind the now withered pines. Then he began to think of the shell-cave where that other Thelma lay hidden in her last deep sleep,—the wailing words of Sigurd came freshly back to his ears, when the poor crazed lad had likened Thelma’s thoughts to his favourite flowers, the pansies—“One by one you will gather and play with her thoughts as though they were these blossoms; your burning

hand will mar their colour—they will wither and furl up and die,—and you—what will you care? Nothing! No man ever cares for a flower that is withered,—not even though his own hand slew it!”

Had he been to blame? he mused, with a sorrowful weight at his heart. Unintentionally, had he,—yes, he would put it plainly,—had he neglected her, just a little? Had he not, with all his true and passionate love for her, taken her beauty, her devotion, her obedience too much for granted—too much as his right? And in these latter months, when her health had made her weaker and more in need of his tenderness, had he not, in a sudden desire for political fame and worldly honour, left her too much alone, a prey to solitude and the often morbid musings which solitude engenders?

He began to blame himself heartily for the misunderstanding that had arisen out of his share in Neville's unhappy secret. Neville had been weak and timid,—he had shrunk nervously from avowing that the notorious Violet Vere was actually the woman he had so faithfully loved and mourned,—but he, Philip, ought not to have humoured him in these fastidious scruples—he ought to have confided everything to Thelma. He remembered now that he had once or twice been uneasy lest rumours of his frequent visits to Miss Vere might possibly reach his wife's ears,—

but, then, as his purpose was absolutely disinterested and harmless, he did not dwell on this idea, but dismissed it, and held his peace for Neville's sake, contenting himself with the thought that, "If Thelma *did* hear anything, she would never believe a word against me."

He could not quite see where his fault had been,—though a fault there was somewhere, as he uneasily felt—and he would no doubt have started indignantly had a small elf whispered in his ear the word "*Conceit*." Yet that was the name of his failing—that and no other. How many men, otherwise noble-hearted, are seriously, though often unconsciously, burdened with this large parcel of blown-out Nothing! Sir Philip did not appear to be conceited—he would have repelled the accusation with astonishment,—not knowing that in his very denial of the fault, the fault existed. He had never been truly humbled but twice in his life,—once as he knelt to receive his mother's dying benediction,—and again when he first loved Thelma, and was uncertain whether his love could be returned by so fair and pure a creature. With these two exceptions, all his experience had tended to give him an excellent opinion of himself,—and that he should possess one of the best and loveliest wives in the world, seemed to him quite in keeping with the usual course of things. The feeling that it was a sheer impossibility for her to ever believe a word against him,

rose out of this inward self-satisfaction—this one flaw in his otherwise bright, honest, and lovable character—a flaw of which he himself was not aware. Now, when for the third time his fairy castle of perfect peace and pleasure seemed shaken to its foundations,—when he again realized the uncertainty of life or death, he felt bewildered and wretched. His chiefest pride was centred in Thelma, and she—was gone! Again he reverted to the miserable idea that, like a melancholy refrain, haunted him—“What if I should find her *dead*!”

Absorbed in painful reflections, he was a very silent companion for Lorimer during the luncheon which they took at a quiet little restaurant well known to the *habitués* of Pall Mall and Regent Street. Lorimer himself had his own reasons for being equally depressed and anxious,—for did he not love Thelma as much as even her husband could?—nay, perhaps more, knowing his love was hopeless. Not always does possession of the adored object strengthen the adoration,—the rapturous dreams of an ideal passion have often been known to surpass reality a thousandfold. So the two friends exchanged but few words,—though they tried to converse cheerfully on indifferent subjects, and failed in the attempt. They had nearly finished their light repast, when a familiar voice saluted them.

“It is Errington,—I thocht I couldna be mistaken! How are ye both?”

Sandy Macfarlane stood before them, unaltered, save that his scanty beard had grown somewhat longer. They had seen nothing of him since their trip to Norway, and they greeted him now with unaffected heartiness, glad of the distraction his appearance afforded them.

"Where do you hail from, Mac?" asked Lorimer, as he made the new-comer sit down at their table. "We haven't heard of you for an age."

"It is a goodish bit of time," assented Macfarlane, "but better late than never. I came up to London a week ago from Glasgie,—and my heed has been in a whirl ever since. Eh, mon! but it's an awfu' place!—maybe I'll get used to't after a wee while."

"Are you going to settle here, then?" inquired Errington, "I thought you intended to be a minister somewhere in Scotland?"

Macfarlane smiled, and his eyes twinkled.

"I hae altered ma opee-nions a bit," he said. "Ye see, ma aunt in Glasgie's deed——"

"I understand," laughed Lorimer. "You've come in for the old lady's money?"

"Puir body!" and Sandy shook his head gravely. "A few hours before she died she tore up her will in a screamin' fury o' Christian charity and forethought,—meanin' to mak anither in favour o' leavin' a' her warld's trash to the Fund for Distributin' Bible Knowledge among the

Heathen—but she never had time to fulfil her intention. She went off like a lamb,—and there being no will, her money fell to me, as the nearest survivin' relative—eh! the puir thing!—if her dees-imbodied spirit is anywhere aboot, she must be in a sair plight to think I've got it, after a' her curses!”

“How much?” asked Lorimer amused.

“Oh, just a fair seventy thousand or so,” answered Macfarlane carelessly.

“Well done, Mac!” said Errington, with a smile, endeavouring to appear interested. “You're quite rich, then? I congratulate you!”

“Riches are a snare,” observed Macfarlane sententiously, “a snare and a decoy to both soul and body!” He laughed and rubbed his hands,—then added with some eagerness, “I say, how is Lady Errington?”

“She's very well,” answered Sir Philip hurriedly, exchanging a quick look with Lorimer, which the latter at once understood. “She's away on a visit just now. I'm going to join her this afternoon.”

“I'm sorry she's away,” said Sandy, and he looked very disappointed; “but I'll see her when she comes back. Will she be long absent?”

“No, not long—a few days only”—and as Errington said this an involuntary sigh escaped him.

A few days only!—God grant it! But what—what if he should find her *dead*?

Macfarlane noticed the sadness of his expression, but prudently forbore to make any remark upon it. He contented himself with saying—

“Weel, ye’ve got a wife worth having—as I dare say ye know. I shall be glad to pay my respects to her as soon as she returns. I’ve got your address, Errington—will ye take mine?”

And he handed him a small card, on which was written in pencil the number of a house in one of the lowest streets in the East-end of London. Philip glanced at it with some surprise.

“Is *this* where you live?” he asked, with emphatic amazement.

“Yes. It’s just the cleanest tenement I could find in that neighbourhood. And the woman that keeps it is fairly respectable.”

“But with your money,” remonstrated Lorimer, who also looked at the card, “I rather wonder at your choice of abode. Why, my dear fellow, do you *know* what sort of a place it is?”

A steadfast, earnest, *thinking* look came into Macfarlane’s deep-set, grey eyes.

“Yes, I do know, pairfectly,” he said in answer to the question. “It’s a place where there’s misery, starvation, and crime of all sorts,—and there I am in the very midst of it—just where I want to be. Ye see, I was meant to be a meenister—one of those douce, cannie, comfortable bodies that drone in the pulpit about predestina-

tion and original sin, and so forth,—a sort of palaver that does no good to ony reasonable creature—an' if I had followed out this profession, I make nae doot that, with my aunt's seventy thousand, I should be a vera comfortable, respectable, selfish type of a man, who was decently embarked in an apparently important but really useless career——”

“Useless?” interrupted Lorimer archly. “I say, Mac, take care! A minister of the Lord, *useless!*”

“I'm thinkin' there are unco few meen-isters o' the Lord in this warld,” said Macfarlane musingly. “Maist o' them meen-ister to themselves, an' care na a when mair for Christ than Buddha. I tell ye, I was an altered man after we'd been to Norway—the auld pagan set me thinkin' mony an' mony a time—for, ma certes! he's better worthy respect than mony a so-called Christian. And as for his daughter—the twa great blue eyes o' that lassie made me fair ashamed o' mysel'. Why? Because I felt that as a meen-ister o' the Established Kirk, I was bound to be a sort o' heep-ocrite,—ony thinkin', reasonable man wi' a conscience canna be otherwise wi' they folk,—and ye ken, Errington, there's something in your wife's look that maks a body hesitate before tellin' a lee. Weel—what wi' her face an' the auld *bonde's* talk, I reflectit that I couldna be a meen-ister as meen-isters go,—an' that I must e'en follow

oot the Testament's teachings according to ma own way o' thinkin'. First, I fancied I'd rough it abroad as a mees-ionary—then I remembered the savages at hame, an' decided to attend to them before onything else. Then my aunt's siller came in handy—in short, I'm just gaun to live on as wee a handfu' o' the filthy lucre as I can, an' lay oot the rest on the heathens o' London. An' it's as well to do't while I'm alive to see to't mysel'—for I've often observed that if ye leave your warld's gear to the poor when ye're deed, just for the gude reason that ye canna tak it to the grave wi' ye,—it'll melt in a wonderfu' way through the hands o' the 'secretaries' an' 'distributors' o' the fund, till there's naething left for those ye meant to benefit. Ye maunna think I'm gaun to do ony preachin' business down at the East-end,—there's too much o' that an' tract-givin' already. The puir soul whose wee hoosie I've rented hadna tasted bit nor sup for three days—till I came an' startled her into a greetin' fit by takin' her rooms an' payin' her in advance—eh! mon, ye'd have thought I was a saint frae heaven if ye'd heard her blessin' me,—an' a gude curate had called on her just before and had given her a tract to dine on. Ye see, I maun mak mysel' a *friend* to the folk first, before I can do them gude—I maun get to the heart o' their troubles—an' troubles are plentiful in that quarter,—I maun live among them, an' be ane o' them. I wad mind ye that Christ

Himself gave sympathy to begin with,—he did the preachin' afterwards."

"What a good fellow you are, Mac!" said Errington, suddenly seeing his raw Scotch friend with the perverse accent, in quite a new and heroic light.

Macfarlane actually blushed. "Nonsense, not a bit o't!" he declared quite nervously. "It's just pure selfishness, after a'—for I'm simply enjoyin' mysel' the hale day long. Last nicht, I found a wee cripple o' a laddie sittin' by himsel' in the gutter, munchin' a potato skin. I just took him,—he starin' an' blinkin' like an owl at me,—and carried him into my room. There I gave him a plate o' barley broth, an' finished him up wi' a hunk o' gingerbread. Ma certes! Ye should ha' seen the rascal laugh! 'Twas better than lookin' at a play from a ten-guinea box on the grand tier!"

"By Jove, Sandy, you're a brick!" cried Lorimer, laughing to hide a very different emotion—"I had no idea you were that sort of chap."

"Nor had I," said Macfarlane quite simply—"I never fashed mysel' wi' thinkin' o' ither folks troubles at a'—I never even took into conseederation the meanin' o' the Testament teachings till—I saw your leddy wife, Errington." He paused a moment, then added gravely—"Yes—and I've aften fancied she maun be a real live angel,—an' I've sought always to turn my hand to something

useful and worth the doin',—ever since I met her."

"I'll tell her so," said poor Philip, his heart aching for his lost love as he spoke, though he smiled. "It will give her pleasure to hear it."

Macfarlane blushed again like any awkward schoolboy.

"Oh, I dinna ken aboot that!" he said hurriedly. "She's just a grand woman anyway." Then, bethinking himself of another subject, he asked, "Have you heard o' the Reverend Mr. Dyceworthy lately?"

Errington and Lorimer replied in the negative.

Macfarlane laughed—his eyes twinkled. "It's evident ye never read police reports," he said—"Talk o' meen-isters,—he's a pretty specimen! He's been hunted out o' his place in Yorkshire for carryin' on love-affairs wi' the women o' his congregation. One day he locked himsel' in the vestry wi' the new-married wife o' one o' his preencipal supporters—an' he had a grand time of it—till the husband came an' dragged him oot an' thrashed him soundly. Then he left the neighbourhood—an'—just th' ither day—he turned up in Glasgie."

Macfarlane paused and laughed again.

"Well?" said Lorimer, with some interest—"Did you meet him there?"

"That did I—but no to speak to him—he was

far too weel lookit after to need my services,” and Macfarlane rubbed his great hands together with an irrepressible chuckle. “There was a crowd o’ hootin laddies round him, an’ he was callin on the heavens to bear witness to his purity. His hat was off—an’ he had a black eye—an’ a’ his coat was covered wi’ mud, an’ a policeman was embracin’ him vera affectionately by th’ arm. He was in charge for drunken, disorderly, an’ indecent conduct—an’ the magistrate cam’ down pretty hard on him. The case proved to be exceptionally outrageous—so he’s sentenced to a month’s imprisonment an’ hard labour. Hard labour! Eh, mon! but that’s fine! Fancy him at work—at real work for the first time in a’ his days! Gude Lord! I can see him at it!”

“So he’s come to that!” and Errington shrugged his shoulders with weary contempt. “I thought he would. His career as a minister is ended,—that’s one comfort!”

“Don’t be too sure o’ that!” said Sandy cautiously. “There’s always America, ye ken. He can mak’ a holy martyr o’ himsel’ there! He may gain as muckle a reputation as Henry Ward Beecher—ye can never tell what may happen—’tis a queer world!”

“Queer, indeed!” assented Lorimer as they all rose and left the restaurant together. “If our present existence is the result of a fortuitous conglomeration of atoms,—I think the atoms ought to

have been more careful what they were about, that's all I can say !”

They reached the open street, where Macfarlane shook hands and went his way, promising to call on Errington so soon as Thelma should be again at home.

“He's turned out quite a fine fellow,” said Lorimer, when he had gone. “I should never have thought he had so much in him. He has become a philanthropist.”

“I fancy he's better than an ordinary philanthropist,” replied Philip. “Philanthropists often talk a great deal and do nothing.”

“Like members of Parliament,” suggested Lorimer, with a smile.

“Exactly so. By-the-by—I've resigned my candidateship.”

“Resigned? Why?”

“Oh, I'm sick of the thing! One has to be such a humbug to secure one's votes. I had a wretched time yesterday,—speechifying and trying to rouse up clodhoppers to the interests of their country,—and all the time my darling at home was alone, and breaking her heart about me! By Jove! if I'd only known! When I came back this morning to all this misery—I told Neville to send in my resignation. I repeated the same thing to him the last thing before I left the house.”

“But you might have waited a day or two,”

said Lorimer wonderingly. "You're such a fellow of impulse, Phil—"

"Well, I can't help it. I'm tired of politics. I began with a will, fancying that every member of the house had his country's interests at heart,—not a bit of it! They're all for themselves—most of them, at any rate—they're not even sincere in their efforts to do good to the population. And it's all very well to stick up for the aristocracy; but why, in Heaven's name, can't some of the wealthiest among them do as much as our old Mac is doing, for the outcast and miserable poor? I see some real usefulness and good in *his* work, and I'll help him in it with a will—when—when Thelma comes back."

Thus talking, the two friends reached the Garrick Club, where they found Beau Lovelace in the reading-room, turning over some new books with the curious smiling air of one who believes there can be nothing original under the sun, and that all literature is mere repetition. He greeted them cheerfully.

"Come out of here," he said. "Come into a place where we can talk. There's an old fellow over there who's ready to murder any member who even whispers. We won't excite his angry passions. You know we're all literature-mongers here,—we've each got our own little particular stall where we sort our goods,—our mouldy oranges, sour apples, and indigestible nuts,—and we polish

them up to look tempting to the public. It's a great business, and we can't bear to be looked at while we're turning our apples with the best side outwards, and boiling our oranges to make them swell and seem big! We like to do our humbug in silence and alone."

He led the way into the smoking-room—and there heard with much surprise and a great deal of concern the story of Thelma's flight.

"Ingenuous boy!" he said kindly, clapping Philip on the shoulder. "How could you be such a fool as to think that repeated visits to Violet Vere, no matter on what business, would not bring the dogs of scandal yelping about your heels! I wonder you didn't see how you were compromising yourself!"

"He never told *me* a word about it," interposed Lorimer, "or else I should have given him a bit of my mind on the subject."

"Of course!" agreed Lovelace. "And—excuse me—why the devil didn't you let your secretary manage his domestic squabbles by himself?"

"He's very much broken down," said Errington. "A hopeless, frail, disappointed man. I thought I could serve him——"

"I see!" and Beau's eyes were bent on him with a very friendly look. "You're a first-rate fellow, Errington,—but you shouldn't fly off so readily on the rapid wings of impulse. Now I

suppose you want to shoot Lennox—that can't be done—not in England at any rate."

"It can't be done at all, anywhere," said Lorimer gravely. "He's dead."

Beau Lovelace started back in amazement. "Dead! You don't say so! Why, he was dining last night at the Criterion—I saw him there."

Briefly they related the sudden accident that had occurred, and described its fatal result.

"He died horribly!" said Philip in a low voice. "I haven't got over it yet. That evil, tortured face of his haunts me."

Lovelace was only slightly shocked. He had known Lennox's life too well, and had despised it too thoroughly, to feel much regret now it was thus abruptly ended.

"Rather an unpleasant exit for such a fellow," he remarked. "Not æsthetic at all. And so you were going to castigate him?"

"Look!" and Philip showed him the horse-whip; "I've been carrying this thing about all day,—I wish I could drop it in the streets; but if I did, some one would be sure to pick it up and return it to me."

"If it were a purse containing bank-notes you could drop it with the positive certainty of never seeing it again," laughed Beau. "Here, hand it over!" and he possessed himself of it. "I'll keep it till you come back. You leave for Norway to-night, then?"

“Yes. If I can. But it’s the winter season—and there’ll be all manner of difficulties. I’m afraid it’s no easy matter to reach the Altenfjord at this time of year.”

“Why not use your yacht, and be independent of obstacles?” suggested Lovelace.

“She’s under repairs, worse luck!” sighed Philip despondingly. “She won’t be in sailing condition for another month. No—I must take my chance—that’s all. It’s possible I may overtake Thelma at Hull—that’s my great hope.”

“Well, don’t be down in the mouth about it, my boy!” said Beau sympathetically. “It’ll all come right, depend upon it! Your wife’s a sweet, gentle, noble creature,—and when once she knows all about the miserable mistake that has arisen, I don’t know which will be greatest, her happiness or her penitence, for having misunderstood the position. Now let’s have some coffee.”

He ordered this refreshment from a passing waiter, and as he did so, a gentleman, with hands clasped behind his back, and a suave smile on his countenance, bowed to him with marked and peculiar courtesy as he sauntered on his way through the room. Beau returned the salute with equal politeness.

“That’s Whipper,” he explained with a smile, when the gentleman was out of earshot. “The best and most generous of men! He’s a critic—all critics are large-minded and generous, we know,

—but he happens to be remarkably so. He did me the kindest turn I ever had in my life. When my first book came out, he fell upon it tooth and claw, mangled it, tore it to ribbons, metaphorically speaking,—and waved the fragments mockingly in the eyes of the public. From that day my name was made—my writings sold off with delightful rapidity, and words can never tell how I blessed, and how I still bless, Whipper! He always pitches into me—that's what's so good of him! We're awfully polite to each other, as you observe—and what is so perfectly charming is that he's quite unconscious how much he's helping me along! He's really a first-rate fellow. But I haven't yet attained the summit of my ambition,”—and here Lovelace broke off with a sparkle of fun in his clear steel-grey eyes.

“Why, what else do you want?” asked Lorimer laughing.

“I want,” returned Beau solemnly, “I want to be jeered at by *Punch*! I want *Punch* to make mouths at me, and give me the benefit of his inimitable squeak and gibber. No author's fame is quite secure till dear old *Punch* has abused him. Abuse is the thing nowadays, you know. Heaven forbid that I should be praised by *Punch*! That would be frightfully unfortunate!”

Here the coffee arrived, and Lovelace dispensed it to his friends, talking gaily the while in an effort to distract Errington from his gloomy thoughts.

“I’ve just been informed on respectable authority, that Walt Whitman is the new Socrates,” he said laughingly. “I felt rather stunned at the moment, but I’ve got over it now. Oh, this deliciously mad London! what a gigantic Colney Hatch it is for the crazed folk of the world to air their follies in! That any reasonable Englishmen with such names as Shakespeare, Byron, Keats, and Shelley, to keep the glory of their country warm, should for one moment consider Walt Whitman a *poet*! Ye gods! Where are your thunderbolts!”

“He’s an American, isn’t he?” asked Errington.

“He is, my dear boy! An American whom the sensible portion of America rejects. We, therefore,—out of opposition,—take him up. His chief recommendation is that he writes blatantly concerning commonplaces,—regardless of music or rhythm. Here’s a bit of him concerning the taming of oxen. He says the tamer lives in a

“‘Placid pastoral region.

There they bring him the three-year-olds and the four-year-olds to break them,—

Some are such beautiful animals, so lofty looking,—some are buff-coloured, some mottled, one has a white line running along his back, some are brindled,

Some have wide flaring horns (a good sign!) look you! the bright hides
See the two with stars on their foreheads—see the round bodies and broad backs

How straight and square they stand on their legs——’”

“Stop, stop!” cried Lorimer, putting his hands

to his ears. "This is a practical joke, Beau! No one would call that jargon poetry!"

"Oh! wouldn't they though!" exclaimed Lovelace. "Let some critic of reputation once start the idea, and you'll have the good London folk who won't bother to read him for themselves, declaring him as fine as Shakespeare. The dear English muttons! fine Southdowns! fleecy baalambs! once let the Press-bell tinkle loudly enough across the fields of literature, and they'll follow, bleating sweetly in any direction! The sharpest heads in our big metropolis are those who know this, and who act accordingly."

"Then why don't *you* 'act accordingly'?" asked Errington, with a faint smile.

"Oh, I? I can't! I never asked a favour from the Press in my life—but its little bell has tinkled for me all the same, and a few of the muttons follow, but not all. Are you off?" this, as they rose to take their leave. "Well, Errington, old fellow," and he shook hands warmly, "a pleasant journey to you, and a happy return home! My best regards to your wife. Lorimer, have you settled whether you'll go with me to Italy? I start the day after to-morrow."

Lorimer hesitated—then said, "All right! My mother's delighted at the idea,—yes, Beau! we'll come. Only I hope we shan't bore you."

"Bore me! you know me better than that," and he accompanied them out of the smoking-room

into the hall, while Errington, a little surprised at this sudden arrangement, observed—

“Why, George—I thought you’d be here when we came back from Norway—to—to welcome Thelma, you know!”

George laughed. “My dear boy, *I* shan’t be wanted! Just let me know how everything goes on. You—you see, I’m in duty bound to take my mother out of London in winter.”

“Just so!” agreed Lovelace, who had watched him narrowly while he spoke. “Don’t grudge the old lady her southern sunshine, Errington! Lorimer wants brushing up a bit too—he looks seedy. Then I shall consider it settled—the day after to-morrow, we meet at Charing Cross—morning tidal express, of course,—never go by night service across the Channel if you can help it.”

Again they shook hands and parted.

“Best thing that young fellow can do!” thought Lovelace as he returned to the Club reading-room. “The sooner he gets out of this, into new scenes the better,—he’s breaking his heart over the beautiful Thelma. By Jove! the boy’s eyes looked like those of a shot animal whenever her name was mentioned. He’s rather badly hit!”

He sat down and began to meditate. “What can I do for him, I wonder?” he thought. “Nothing, I suppose. A love of that sort can’t be remedied. It’s a pity—a great pity! And I

don't know any woman likely to make a counter-impression on him. He'd never put up with an Italian beauty"—he paused in his reflections, and the colour flushed his broad, handsome brow, as the dazzling vision of a sweet, piquant face with liquid dark eyes and rippling masses of rich brown hair came flitting before him—"unless he saw Angela," he murmured to himself softly,—“and he will not see her,—besides, Angela loves *me!*”

And after this, his meditations seemed to be particularly pleasant, to judge from the expression of his features. Beau was by no means ignorant of the tender passion—he had his own little romance, as beautiful and bright as a summer-day—but he had resolved that London, with its love of gossip, its scandal, and society papers,—London, that on account of his popularity as a writer, watched his movements and chronicled his doings in the most authoritative and incorrect manner,—London should have no chance of penetrating into the secret of his private life. And so far he had succeeded—and was likely still to succeed.

Meanwhile, as he still sat in blissful reverie, pretending to read a newspaper, though his thoughts were far away from it, Errington and Lorimer arrived at the Midland Station. Britta was already there with the luggage,—she was excited and pleased—her spirits had risen at the prospect of seeing her mistress soon again,—

possibly, she thought gladly, they might find her at Hull,—they might not have to go to Norway at all. The train came up to the platform—the tickets were taken,—and Sir Philip, with Britta, entered a first-class compartment, while Lorimer stood outside leaning with folded arms on the carriage-window, talking cheerfully.

“You’ll find her all right, Phil, I’m positive!” he said. “I think it’s very probable she has been compelled to remain at Hull,—and even at the worst, Britta can guide you all over Norway, if necessary. Nothing will daunt *her*.”

And he nodded kindly to the little maid who had regained her rosy colour and the sparkle of her eyes in the eagerness she felt to rejoin her beloved “Fröken.” The engine-whistle gave a warning shriek—Philip leaned out and pressed his friend’s hand warmly.

“Good-bye, old fellow! I’ll write to you in Italy.”

“All right—mind you do! And I say—give my love to Thelma!”

Philip smiled and promised. The train began to move,—slowly at first, then more quickly, till with clattering uproar and puffing clouds of white steam, it rushed forth from the station, winding through the arches like a black snake, till it had twisted itself rapidly out of sight. Lorimer, left alone, looked after it wistfully, with a heavy weight of unuttered love and sorrow at his heart,

and as he at last turned away, those haunting words that he had heard under the pines at the Altenfjord recurred again and again to his memory—the words uttered by the distraught Sigurd—and how true they were, he thought! how desperately, cruelly true!

“Good things may come for others—but for *you*, the heavens are empty!”

CHAPTER XIII.

“Honour is an old-world thing, but it smells sweet to those in whose hand it is strong.”—OUIDA.

DISAPPOINTMENT upon disappointment awaited Errington at Hull. Unfortunately, neither he nor Britta knew of the existence of the good Norwegian innkeeper, Friedhof, who had assisted Thelma in her flight—and all their persistent and anxious inquiries elicited no news of her. Moreover, there was no boat of any kind leaving immediately for Norway—not even a whaler or fishing-smack. In a week’s time,—possibly later,—there would be a steamer starting for Christiansund, and for this, Errington, though almost mad with impatience, was forced to wait. And in the meantime, he roamed about the streets of Hull, looking eagerly at every fair-haired woman who passed him, and always hoping that Thelma herself would suddenly meet him face to face, and put her hands in his. He wrote to Neville and told him to send on any letters that might arrive for him, and by every post he waited anxiously for

one from Thelma, but none came. To relieve his mind a little, he scribbled a long letter to her, explaining everything, telling her how ardently he loved and worshipped her—how he was on his way to join her at the Altenfjord,—and ending by the most passionate vows of unchanging love and fidelity. He was somewhat soothed when he had done this—though he did not realize the fact that in all probability he himself might arrive before the letter. The slow, miserable days went on—the week was completed—the steamer for Christiansund started at last,—and, after a terribly stormy passage, he and the faithful Britta were landed there.

On arrival, he learned that a vessel bound for the North Cape had left on the previous day—there would not be another for a fortnight. Cursing his ill-luck, he resolved to reach the Altenfjord by land, and began to make arrangements accordingly. Those who knew the country well endeavoured to dissuade him from this desperate project—the further north, the greater danger, they told him,—moreover, the weather was, even for Norway, exceptionally trying. Snow lay heavily over all the country he would have to traverse—the only means of conveyance was by carriage or *pulkha*—the latter a sort of sledge used by the Laplanders, made in the form of a boat, and generally drawn by reindeer. The capabilities of the carriage would be exhausted as soon as the snow-covered regions were reached—and to

manage a *pulkha* successfully, required special skill of no ordinary kind. But the courageous little Britta made short work of all these difficulties—she could drive a *pulkha*,—she knew how to manage reindeer,—she entertained not the slightest doubt of being able to overcome all the obstacles on the way. At the same time, she frankly told Sir Philip that the journey would be a long one, perhaps occupying several days—that they would have to rest at different farms or *stations* on the road, and put up with hard fare—that the cold would be intense,—that often they would find it difficult to get relays of the required reindeer,—and that it might perhaps be wiser to wait for the next boat going to the North Cape.

But Errington would hear of no more delays—each hour that passed filled him with fresh anxieties—and once in Norway he could not rest. The idea that Thelma might be ill—dying—or dead—gained on him with redoubled force,—and his fears easily communicating themselves to Britta, who was to the full as impatient as he, the two made up their minds, and providing every necessary for the journey they could think of, they started for the far sunless North, through a white, frozen land, which grew whiter and more silent the further they went,—even as the brooding sky above them grew darker and darker. The aurora borealis flashed its brilliant shafts of colour against the sable breast of heaven,—the tall pines, stripped

bare, every branch thick with snow and dropping icicles, stood,—pale ghosts of the forest,—shedding frozen tears—the moon, more like steel than silver, shone frostily cold, her light seeming to deepen rather than soften the dreariness of the land—and on—on—on—they went, Britta enveloped to the chin in furs, steadily driving the strange elfin-looking steeds with their horned heads casting long distorted shadows on the white ground,—and Philip beside her, urging her on with feverish impatience, while he listened to the smooth trot of the reindeer,—the tinkle of the bells on their harness, and the hiss of the sledge across the sparkling snow.

Meanwhile, as he thus pursued his long and difficult journey, rumour was very busy with his name in London. Everybody—that is, everybody worth consideration in the circle of the “Upper Ten”—was talking about him,—shrugging their shoulders, lifting their eyebrows and smiling knowingly, whenever he was mentioned. He became more known in one day than if he had served his country’s interests in Parliament for years.

On the very morning after he had left the metropolis *en route* for Norway, that admirably conducted society journal, the *Snake*, appeared,—and of course, had its usual amount of eager purchasers, anxious to see the latest bit of aristocratic scandal. Often these good folks were severely

disappointed—the *Snake* was sometimes so frightfully dull, that it had actually nothing to say against anybody—then, naturally, it was not worth buying. But this time it was really interesting—it knocked down—or tried to knock down—at one blow, a formerly spotless reputation—and “really—really!” said the Upper Ten, “it was dreadful, but of course it was to be expected! Those quiet, seemingly virtuous persons are always the worst when you come to know them, yet who would have thought it!” And society read the assailing paragraph, and rolled it in its rank mouth, like a bon-bon, enjoying its flavour. It ran as follows :—

“We hear on excellent authority that the Norwegian ‘beauty,’ Lady Bruce-Errington, wife of Sir Philip Bruce-Errington, is about to sue for a divorce on the ground of infidelity. The offending *dama* in the question is an admired actress, well-known to the frequenters of the Brilliant Theatre. But there are always two sides to these affairs, and it is rumoured that the fair Norwegian (who before her marriage, we understand, was a great adept in the art of milking reindeer on the shores of her native Fjord) has private reasons of her own for desiring the divorce, not altogether in keeping with her stated reasons or her apparent reserve. We are, however, always on the side of the fair sex, and, as the faithless husband has made no secret of his

new *liaison*, we do not hesitate to at once pronounce in the lady's favour. The case is likely to prove interesting to believers in wedded happiness, combined with the strictest moral and religious sentiments."

Quite by accident this piece of would-be "smartness" was seen by Beau Lovelace. He had a wholesome contempt for the *Snake*—and all its class,—he would never have looked at it, or known of the paragraph, had not a friend of his at the Garrick pointed it out to him with half a smile and half a sneer.

"It's a damned lie!" said Beau briefly.

"That remains to be proved!" answered his friend, and went away laughing.

Beau read it over and over again, his blood firing with honest indignation. Thelma! Thelma—that pure white lily of womanhood,—was she to have her stainless life blurred by the trail of such a thing as the *Snake*?—and was Errington's honour to be attainted in his absence, and he condemned without a word uttered in his defence?

"Detestable blackguard!" muttered Lovelace, reverting in his mind to the editor of the journal in question. "What's his name I wonder?" He searched and found it at the top of a column—"Sole Editor and Proprietor, C. Snawley-Grubbs, to whom all cheques and post-office orders should be made payable. The Editor cannot be responsible for the return of rejected MSS."

Beau noted the name, and wrote the address of the office in his pocket-book, smiling curiously to himself the while.

“I’m almost glad Errington’s out of the way,” he said half aloud. “He shan’t see this thing if I can help it, though I dare say some particularly affectionate friend will send it to him, carefully marked. At any rate, he needn’t know it just yet—and as for Lorimer—shall I tell him? No, I won’t. I’ll have the game all to myself—and—by Jove! how I *shall* enjoy it!”

An hour later he stood in the office of the *Snake*, courteously inquiring for Mr. Snawley-Grubbs. Apparently he had come on horseback, for he held a riding-whip in his hand,—the very whip Errington had left with him the previous day. The inky, dirty, towzle-headed boy who presided in solitary grandeur over the *Snake*’s dingy premises, stared at him inquiringly,—visitors of his distinguished appearance and manner being rather uncommon. Those who usually had business with the great Grubbs were of a different type altogether,—some of them discarded valets or footmen, who came to gain half a crown or five shillings by offering information as to the doings of their late masters and mistresses,—shabby “supers” from the theatres, who had secured the last bit of scandal concerning some celebrated stage or professional “beauty”—sporting men and turf gamblers of the lowest

class,—unsuccessful dramatists and small verse writers—these, with now and then a few “ladies”—ladies of the bar-room, ballet, and *demi-monde*, were the sort of persons who daily sought private converse with Grubbs—and Beau Lovelace, with his massive head, fine muscular figure, keen eyes, and self-assertive mien, was quite a novel specimen of manhood for the wondering observation of the office-boy, who scrambled off his high chair with haste and something of respect as he said—

“What name, sir, please?”

“Beaufort Lovelace,” said the gentleman, with a bland smile. “Here is my card. Ask Mr. Grubbs whether he can see me for a few minutes. If he is engaged—editors generally *are* engaged—tell him I’ll wait.”

The boy went off in a greater hurry than ever. The name of Lovelace was quite familiar to him,—he knew him, not as a distinguished novelist, but as “’im who makes such a precious lot of money.” And he was breathless with excitement when he reached the small editorial chamber at the top of a dark, narrow flight of stairs, wherein sat the autocratic Snawley, smiling suavely over a heap of letters and disordered MSS. He glanced at the card which his ink-smearing attendant presented him.

“Ah, indeed!” he said condescendingly. “Lovelace—Lovelace? Oh yes—I suppose it must be the novelist of that name—yes!—show him up.”

Shown up he was accordingly. He entered the room with a firm tread, and closed the door behind him.

"How do you do, my dear sir!" exclaimed Grubbs warmly. "You are well known to me by reputation! I am charmed—delighted to make the personal acquaintance of one who is—yes—let me say, who is a brother in literature! Sit down, I beg of you!"

And he waved his hand towards a chair, thereby displaying the great rings that glittered on his podgy fingers.

Beau, however, did not seat himself—he only smiled very coldly and contemptuously.

"We can discuss the fraternal nature of our relationship afterwards," he said satirically. "Business first. Pray sir,"—here he drew from his pocket the last number of the *Snake*—"are you the writer of this paragraph?"

He pointed to it, as he flattened the journal and laid it in front of the editor on his desk. Mr. Snawley-Grubbs glanced at it and smiled unconcernedly.

"No, I am not. But I happen to know it is perfectly correct. I received the information on the highest—the very highest and most credible authority."

"Indeed!" and Beau's lip curled haughtily, while his hand clenched the riding-whip more firmly. "Then allow me to tell you, sir, that it is

utterly false in every particular—moreover—that it is a gross libel,—published with deliberate intent to injure those whom it presumes to mention,—and that, whoever wrote it,—you, sir, you alone are responsible for a most mischievous, scandalous, and damnable lie !”

Mr. Grubbs was in no wise disconcerted. Honest indignation honestly expressed, always amused him—he was amused now.

“You’re unduly excited, Mr. Lovelace,” he said with a little laugh. “Permit me to remark that your language is rather extraordinary—quite *too* strong under the circumstances ! However, you’re a privileged person—genius is always a little mad, or shall we say,—eccentric ? I suppose you are a friend of Sir Philip Errington, and you naturally feel hurt—yes—yes, I quite understand ! But the scourge of the press—the wholesome, purifying scourge, cannot be withheld out of consideration for private or personal feelings. No—no ! There’s a higher duty—the duty we owe to the public !”

“I tell you again,” repeated Lovelace firmly—“the whole thing is a lie. *Will* you apologize ?”

Mr. Grubbs threw himself back in his chair and laughed aloud.

“Apologize ? My dear sir, you must be dreaming ! Apologize ? Certainly not ! I cannot retract the statements I have made—and I firmly believe them to be true. And though

there is a saying, 'the greater the truth the greater the libel,' I'm ready, sir, and, always have been ready, to sacrifice myself to the cause of truth. Truth, truth for ever! Tell the truth and shame the devil! You are at liberty to inform Sir Philip Errington from me, that as it is my object—a laudable and praiseworthy one, too, I think—to show up the awful immorality now reigning in our upper classes, I do not regret in the least the insertion of the paragraph in question. If it only makes him ashamed of his vices, I shall have done a good deed, and served the interests of society at large. At the same time, if he wishes to bring an action for libel——”

“You dog!” exclaimed Lovelace fiercely, approaching him with such a sudden rapid stride that the astonished editor sprang up and barricaded himself behind his own chair. “You hope for that, do you? An action for libel! nothing would please you better! To bring your scandalous printed trash into notoriety,—to hear your name shouted by dirty hawkers and newsboys—to be sentenced as a first-class misdemeanant; ah, no such luck for you! I know the tricks of your vile trade! There are other ways of dealing with a vulgar bully and coward!”

And before the startled Grubbs could realize his position, Lovelace closed with him, bent him under, and struck the horsewhip smartly across his back and shoulders. He uttered a yell of pain

and fury, and strove vigorously to defend himself, but, owing to his obesity, his muscles were weak and flabby, and he was powerless against the activity and strength of his opponent. Lash after lash descended regularly and mercilessly—his cries, which gradually became like the roarings of a bull of Bashan, were unheard, as the office-boy below, profiting by a few idle moments, had run across the street to buy some chestnuts at a stall he particularly patronized. Beau thrashed on with increasing enjoyment—Grubbs resisted him less and less, till finally he slipped feebly down on the floor and grovelled there, gasping and groaning. Beau gave him one or two more artistic cuts, and stood above him, with the serene, triumphant smile of a successful athlete. Suddenly a loud peal of laughter echoed from the doorway,—a woman stood there, richly dressed in silk and fur, with diamonds sparkling in her ears and diamonds clasping the long boa at her throat. It was Violet Vere.

“Why, Snawley!” she cried with cheerful familiarity. “How are you? All broken, and no one to pick up the pieces! Serve you right! Got it at last, eh? Don’t get up! You look so comfortable!”

“Bodily assault,” gasped Grubbs. “I’ll summons—call the police—call,” his voice died away in inarticulate gurglings, and raising himself, he sat up on the floor in a sufficiently abject and

ludicrous posture, wiping the tears of pain from his eyes. Beau looked at the female intruder and recognized her at once. He saluted her with cold courtesy, and turned again to Grubbs.

“*Will* you apologize?”

“No—I—I *won't*!”

Beau made another threatening movement—Miss Vere interposed.

“Stop a bit,” she said, regarding him with her insolent eyes, in which lurked, however, an approving smile. “I don’t know who you are, but you seem a fighting man! Don’t go at him again till I’ve had a word. I say, Grubbs! you’ve been hitting at me in your trashy paper.”

Grubbs still sat on the floor groaning.

“You must eat those words,” went on the Vere calmly. “Eat ’em up with sauce for dinner. The ‘admired actress well known at the Brilliant,’ has nothing to do with the Bruce-Errington man,—not she! He’s a duffer,—a regular stiff one—no go about him anyhow. And what the deuce do you mean by calling me an offending *dama*? Keep your oaths to yourself, will you?”

Beau Lovelace was amused. Grubbs turned his watering eyes from one to the other in wretched perplexity. He made an effort to stand up and succeeded.

“I’ll have you arrested, sir!” he exclaimed, shaking his fist at Beau, and quivering with

passion, "on a charge of bodily assault—shameful bodily assault, sir!"

"All right!" returned Beau coolly. "If I were fined a hundred pounds for it, I should think it cheap for the luxury of thrashing such a hound!"

Grubbs quaked at the determined attitude and threatening eye of his assailant, and turned for relief to Miss Vere, whose smile, however, was not sympathetic.

"You'd better cave in!" she remarked airily. "You've got the worst of it, you know!"

She had long been on confidential terms with the *Snake* proprietor, and she spoke to him now with the candour of an old friend.

"Dear me, what do you expect of me!" he almost whimpered. "I'm not to blame! The paragraph was inserted without my knowledge by my sub-editor—he's away just now, and—there! why?" he cried with sudden defiance, "why don't you ask Sir Francis Lennox about it? He wrote the whole thing."

"Well, he's dead," said Miss Vere with the utmost coolness. "So it wouldn't be much use asking *him*. *He* can't answer,—you'll have to answer for him."

"I don't believe it!" exclaimed Mr. Grubbs. "He can't be dead!"

"Oh yes, he can, and he *is*," retorted Violet. "And a good job too! He was knocked over by

a train at Charing Cross. You'll see it in to-day's paper, if you take the trouble to look. And mind you contradict all that stuff about me in your next number—do you hear? I'm going to America with a Duke next month, and I can't afford to have my reputation injured. And I won't be called a '*dama*' for any penny-a-liner living." She paused, and again broke out laughing, "Poor old Snawley! You do look so sore! Ta-ta!" And she moved towards the door. Lovelace, always courteous, opened it for her. She raised her hard, bright eyes, and smiled.

"Thanks! Hope I shall see you again some day!"

"You are very good!" responded Beau gravely.

Either his tone, which was one of chill indifference, or something in his look, irritated her suddenly—for a rush of hot colour crimsoned her face, and she bit her lips vexedly as she descended the office-stairs.

"He's one of your high-and-mighty sort," she thought disdainfully, as she entered her cosy brougham and was driven away. "Quite too awfully moral!" She pulled a large, elaborately cut glass scent-bottle out of the pocket of her cloak, and, unscrewing the gold top, applied it, not to her nose, but her mouth. It contained neat Cognac—and she drank a goodly gulp of it with evident relish, swallowing a scented bon-bon im-

mediately afterwards to take away the suspicious odour. "Yes—quite too awfully moral!" she repeated with a grin. "Not in my line at all! Lord! It's lucky there are not many such fellows about, or what would become of *me*? A precious poor business I should make of it!"

Meanwhile, Lovelace, left alone again with Mr. Grubbs, reiterated his demand for an apology. Grubbs made a rush for the door, as soon as Miss Vere had gone, with the full intention of summoning the police, but Beau coolly placed his back against it with resolute firmness, and flourished his whip defiantly.

"Come, sir, none of this nonsense!" he said sternly. "I don't mean to leave this spot till I have satisfaction. If Sir Francis Lennox wrote that scandalous paragraph the greater rascal he,—and the more shame to you for inserting it. You, who make it your business to know all the dirty alleys and dark corners of life, must have known *his* character pretty thoroughly. There's not the slightest excuse for you. Will you apologize?—and retract every word of that paragraph in your next issue?"

Grubbs, breathless with rage and fear, glared at him, but made no answer.

"If you refuse to comply," went on Beau deliberately, balancing the horsewhip lightly on his hand, "I'll just tell you what the consequences will be. I've thrashed you once—and I'll thrash

you again. I have only to give the cue to several worthy fellows of my acquaintance, who don't care how much they pay for their fun, and each of them in turn will thrash you. As for an action for libel, don't expect it—but I swear there shan't be a safe corner in London for you. If, however, you publish next week a full retraction of your printed lie—why, then—I shall be only too happy to forget that such an individual as yourself burdens this planet. There are the two alternatives—choose!”

Grubbs hesitated, but coward fear made him quail at the prospect of unlimited thrashings.

“Very well,” he said sullenly. “Write what you want put in—I'll attend to it—I don't mind obliging Miss Vere. But all the same, I'll have *you* arrested!”

Beau laughed. “Do so by all means!” he said gaily. “I'll leave my address with you!” He wrote rapidly a few lines on a piece of paper to the following effect—

“We have to entirely contradict a statement we made last week respecting a supposed forthcoming divorce case, in which Sir Philip Bruce-Errington was seriously implicated. There was no truth whatever in the statement, and we herewith apologize most humbly and heartily for having inadvertently given credence to a rumour which is now proved to be utterly false and without the slightest shadow of a foundation.”

He handed this to Grubbs.

“Insert that word for word, at the head of your paragraphs,” he said, “and you’ll hear no more of me, unless you give me fresh provocation. And I advise you to think twice before you have me arrested—for I’ll defend my own case, and—ruin you! I’m rather a dangerous customer to have much to do with! However, you’ve got my card—you know where to find me if you want me. Only you’d better send after me to-night if you do—to-morrow I may be absent.”

He smiled, and drew on his gloves leisurely, eyeing meanwhile the discomfited editor, who was furtively rubbing his shoulder where the lash had stung it somewhat severely.

“I’m exceedingly glad I’ve hurt you, Mr. Grubbs,” he said blandly. “And the next time you want to call me your brother in literature, pray reflect on the manner in which my fraternal affection displayed itself! *Good morning!*”

And he took his departure with a quiet step and serene manner, leaving Snawley-Grubbs to his own meditations, which were far from agreeable. He was not ignorant of the influence Beau Lovelace possessed, both on the press and in society—he was a general favourite,—a man whose opinions were quoted, and whose authority was accepted everywhere. If he appeared to answer a charge of assault against Grubbs, and defended his own case, he certainly would have

the best of it. He might—he would have to pay a fine, but what did he care for that? He would hold up the *Snake* and its proprietor to the utmost ridicule and opprobrium—his brilliant satire and humour would carry all before it—and he, Snawley-Grubbs, would be still more utterly routed and humiliated. Weighing all these considerations carefully in his mind, the shrinking editor decided to sit down under his horsewhipping in silence and resignation.

It was not a very lofty mode of action—still, it was the safest. Of course Violet Vere would spread the story all through *her* particular “set,”—it made him furious to think of this—yet there was no help for it. He would play the martyr, he thought—the martyr to the cause of truth,—the injured innocent entrapped by false information—he might possibly gain new supporters and sympathizers in this way if he played his cards carefully. He turned to the daily paper, and saw there chronicled the death of Sir Francis Lennox. It *was* true, then. Well! he was not at all affected by it—he merely committed the dead man in the briefest and strongest language to the very lowest of those low and sulphurous regions over which Satan is supposed to have full sway. Not a soul regretted Sir Francis—not even the Vere, whom he had kept and surrounded with every luxury for five years. Only one person, a fair, weary-faced woman away in Germany, shed a few tears

over the lawyer's black-bordered letter that announced his death to her—and this was the deserted wife, who had once loved him. Lady Winsleigh had heard the news,—she shuddered and turned very pale when her husband gently and almost pityingly told her of the sudden and unprepared end that had overtaken her quondam admirer—but she said nothing. She was presiding at the breakfast-table for the first time in many years—she looked somewhat sad and listless, yet lovelier so than in all the usual pride and assertive arrogance of her beauty. Lord Winsleigh read aloud the brief account of the accident in the paper—she listened dreamily,—still mute. He watched her with yearning eyes.

“An awful death for such a man, Clara!” he said at last in a low tone.

She dared not look up—she was trembling nervously. How dreadful it was, she thought, to be thankful that a man was dead!—to feel a relief at his being no longer in this world! Presently her husband spoke again more reservedly.

“No doubt you are greatly shocked and grieved,” he said. “I should not have told you so suddenly—pardon me!”

“I am not grieved,” she murmured unsteadily. “It sounds horrible to say so—but I—I am afraid I am *glad*!”

“Clara!”

She rose and came tremblingly towards him.

She knelt at his feet, though he strove to prevent her,—she raised her large, dark eyes, full of dull agony, to his.

“I’ve been a wicked woman, Harry,” she said, with a strange, imploring thrill of passion in her voice. “I am down—down in the dust before you! Look at me—don’t forgive me—I won’t ask that—you *can’t* forgive me,—but *pity* me!”

He took her hands and laid them round his neck,—he drew her gently, soothingly,—closer, closer, till he pressed her to his heart.

“Down in the dust are you?” he whispered brokenly. “My poor wife! God forbid that I should keep you there!”

BOOK III.

THE LAND OF THE LONG SHADOW.

CHAPTER I.

“They have the night, who had, like us, the day—
We, whom day binds, shall have the night as they—
We, from the fetters of the light unbound,
Healed of our wound of living, shall sleep sound!”

SWINBURNE.

NIGHT on the Altenfjord,—the long, long, changeless night of winter. The sharp snow-covered crests of the mountains rose in white appeal against the darkness of the sky,—the wild north wind tore through the leafless branches of the pine-forests, bringing with it driving pellets of stinging hail. Joyless and songless, the whole landscape lay as though frozen into sculptured stone. The Sun slept,—and the Fjord, black with brooding shadows, seemed silently to ask—where? Where was the great king of Light?—the glorious god of the golden hair and ruddy countenance?—the glittering warrior with the flaming shield and spear invincible? Where had he found his rest? By what strange enchantment had he fallen into

so deep and long a drowsiness? The wind, that had rioted across the mountains, rooting up great trees in its shrieking career northwards, grew hushed as it approached the Altenfjord—there a weird stillness reigned, broken only by the sullen and monotonous plash of the invisible waves upon the scarcely visible shore.

A few tiny, twinkling lights showed the irregular outline of Bosekop, and now and then one or two fishing-boats with sable sails and small coloured lamps at mast and prow would flit across the inky water like dark messengers from another world bound on some mournful errand. Human figures, more shadowy than real, were to be seen occasionally moving on the pier, and to the left of the little town, as the eye grew accustomed to the moveless gloom, a group of persons, like ghosts in a dream, could be dimly perceived, working busily at the mending of nets.

Suddenly a strange, unearthly glow flashed over the sombre scene,—a rosy radiance deepening to brilliant streaks of fire. The dark heavens were torn asunder, and through them streamed flaring pennons of light,—waving, trembling, dancing, luminous ribbons of red, blue, green, and a delicious amber, like the flowing of golden wine,—wider, higher, more dazzlingly lustrous, the wondrous glory shone aloft, rising upward from the horizon—thrusting long spears of lambent flame among the murky retreating

clouds, till in one magnificent coruscation of resplendent beams a blazing arch of gold leaped from east to west, spanning the visible breadth of the Fjord, and casting towards the white peaks above, vivid sparkles and reflections of jewel-like brightness and colour. Here was surely the Rainbow Bridge of Odin—the glittering pathway leading to Valhalla! Long filmy threads of emerald and azure trailed downwards from it, like ropes of fairy flowers, binding it to the earth—above it hung a fleece-like nebulous whiteness,—a canopy through which palpitated sudden flashes of amethyst. Then, as though the arch were a bent bow for the hand of some heavenly hunter, crimson beams darted across it in swift succession, like arrows shot at the dark target of the world. Round and round swept the varying circles of colour—now advancing—now retreating—now turning the sullen waters beneath into a quivering mass of steely green—now beating against the snow-covered hills till they seemed pinnacles of heaped-up pearls and diamonds. The whole landscape was transformed,—and the shadowy cluster of men and women on the shore paused in their toil, and turned their pale faces towards the rippling splendour,—the heavy fishing-nets drooping from their hands like dark webs woven by giant spiders.

“’Tis the first time we have seen the Arch of Death this year,” said one in awed accents.

“Ay, ay!” returned another, with a sigh.

“And some one is bound to cross it, whether he will or no. ’Tis a sure sign!”

“Sure!” they all agreed, in hushed voices as faint and far-off as the breaking of the tide against the rocks on the opposite coast.

As they spoke, the fairy-like bridge in the sky parted asunder and vanished! The brilliant aurora borealis faded by swift degrees—a few moments, and the land was again enveloped in gloom.

It might have been midnight—yet by the clock it was but four in the afternoon. Dreary indeed was the Altenfjord,—yet the neighbouring village of Talvig was even drearier. There, desolation reigned supreme—it was a frozen region of bitter, shelterless cold, where the poverty-stricken inhabitants, smitten by the physical torpor and mental stupefaction engendered by the long, dark season, scarcely stirred out of their miserable homes, save to gather extra fuel. This is the time in Norway, when beyond the Arctic Circle, the old gods yet have sway—when in spite of their persistent, sometimes fanatical, adherence to the strictest forms of Christianity, the people almost unconsciously revert to the superstitions of their ancestors. Gathering round the blazing pine-logs, they recount to one another in low voices the ancient legends of dead and gone heroes,—and listening to the yell of the storm-wind round their huts, they still fancy they hear the wild war-cries

of the Valkyries rushing past at full gallop on their coal-black steeds, with their long hair floating behind them.

On this particular afternoon the appearance of the "Death-Arch," as they called that special form of the aurora, had impressed the Talvig folk greatly. Some of them were at their doors, and, regardless of the piercing cold, occupied themselves in staring languidly at a reindeer sledge which stood outside one of the more distant huts, evidently waiting for some person within. The hoofs of the animals made no impression on the hardened snow—now and again they gently shook the tinkling bells on their harness, but otherwise were very patient. The sledge was in charge of a youthful Laplander—a hideous, stunted specimen of humanity, who appeared to be literally sewed up from head to foot in skins.

This *cortège* was evidently an object of curiosity,—the onlookers eyed it askance, and with a sort of fear. For did it not belong to the terrible *bonde*, Olaf Gùldmar?—and would not the Laplander,—a useful boy, well known in Talvig,—come to some fatal harm by watching, even for a few minutes, the property of an acknowledged pagan? Who could tell? The very reindeer might be possessed by evil spirits,—they were certainly much sleeker and finer than the ordinary run of such animals. There was something uncanny in the very look of them! Thus the stupe-

fied, unreasoning Talvig folk muttered, one to another, leaning drowsily out of their half-open doors.

"'Tis a strange thing," said one man, "that a woman as strong in the fear of the Lord as Lovisa Elsland should call for one of the wicked to visit her on her death-bed."

"Strange enough!" answered his neighbour, blinking over his pipe, and knocking down some of the icicles pendent from his roof. "But maybe it is to curse him with the undying curse of the godly."

"She's done that all her life," said the first speaker.

"That's true! She's been a faithful servant of the Gospel. All's right with her in the next world—she'll die easily."

"Was it for her the Death-Arch shone?" asked an old woman, suddenly thrusting her head, wrapped in a red woollen hood, out of a low doorway, through which the light of a fire sparkled from the background, sending vivid flashes across the snow.

The man who had spoken last shook his head solemnly.

"The Death-Arch never shone for a Christian yet," he said gravely. "No! There's something else in the wind. We can't see it—but it will come—it must come! That sign never fails."

And presently, tired of watching the waiting

sledge and the passive Laplander, he retreated within his house, shutting his door against the darkness and the bitter wind. His neighbours followed his example,—and, save for two or three red glimmers of light here and there, the little village looked as though it had been deserted long ago—a picture of frost-bound silence and solitude.

Meanwhile, in Lovisa Elsland's close and comfortless dwelling, stood Olaf Güldmar. His strong, stately figure, wrapped in furs, seemed almost to fill the little place—he had thrown aside the thick scarf of *wadmel* in which he had been wrapped to the eyes while driving in the teeth of the wind,—and he now lifted his fur cap, thus displaying his silvery hair, ruddy features, and open, massive brow. At that moment a woman who was busying herself in putting fresh pine-logs on the smouldering fire, turned and regarded him intently.

“Lord, Lord !” she muttered—“’tis a man of men,—he rejoiceth in his strength, even as the lion,—and of what avail shall the curse of the wicked avail against the soul that is firmly established !”

Güldmar heard her not—he was looking towards a low pallet bed, on which lay, extended at full length, an apparently insensible form.

“Has she been long thus ?” he asked, in a low voice.

“Since last night,” replied the woman—no

other than Mr. Dyceworthy's former servant, Ulrika. "She wakened suddenly, and bade me send for you. To-day she has not spoken."

The *bonde* sighed somewhat impatiently. He approached the now blazing pine-logs, and as he drew off his thick fur driving-gloves, and warmed his hands at the cheerful blaze, Ulrika again fixed her dull eyes upon him with something of wonder and reluctant admiration. Presently she trimmed an oil-lamp, and set it, burning dimly, on the table. Then she went to the bed and bent over it—after a pause of several minutes, she turned and made a beckoning sign with her finger. Güldmar advanced a little,—when a sudden eldritch shriek startled him back, almost curdling the blood in his veins. Out of the deep obscurity, like some gaunt spectre rising from the tomb, started a face, wrinkled, cadaverous, and distorted by suffering,—a face in which the fierce, fevered eyes glittered with a strange and dreadful brilliancy—the face of Lovisa Elslund, stern, forbidding, and already dark with the shadows of approaching death. She stared vacantly at Güldmar, whose picturesque head was illumined by the ruddy glow of the fire—and feebly shaded her eyes as though she saw something that hurt them. Ulrika raised her on her tumbled pillow, and saying, in cold, unmoved tones—"Speak now, for the time is short," she once more beckoned the *bonde* imperatively.

He approached slowly.

“Lovisa Elsland,” he began in distinct tones, addressing himself to that ghastly countenance still partly shaded by one hand. “I am here—Olaf Gldmar. Dost thou know me?”

At the sound of his voice, a strange spasm contorted the withered features of the dying woman. She bent her head as though to listen to some far-off echo, and held up her skinny finger as though enjoining silence.

“Know thee!” she babbled whisperingly. “How should I not know the brown-haired Olaf! Olaf of the merry eye—Olaf, the pride of the Norse maidens?” She lifted herself in a more erect attitude, and stretching out her lean arms, went on as though chanting a monotonous recitative. “Olaf, the wanderer over wild seas,—he comes and goes in his ship that sails like a white bird on the sparkling waters—long and silent are the days of his absence—mournful are the Fjelds and Fjords without the smile of Olaf—Olaf the King!”

She paused, and Gldmar regarded her in pitying wonder. Her face changed to a new expression—one of wrath and fear.

“Stay, stay!” she cried in penetrating accents. “Who comes from the South with Olaf? The clouds drive fast before the wind—clouds rest on the edge of the dark Fjord—sails red as blood flash against the sky—who comes with Olaf? Fair hair ripples against his breast like streaming sunbeams; eyes blue as the glitter of the northern

lights, are looking upon him—lips crimson and heavy with kisses for Olaf—ah!” She broke off with a cry, and beat the air with her hands as though to keep some threatening thing away from her. “Back, back! Dead bride of Olaf, torment me no more—back, I say! See,”—and she pointed into the darkness before her—“The pale, pale face—the long glittering hair twisted like a snake of gold,—she glides along the path across the mountains,—the child follows!—the child! Why not kill the child as well—why not?”

She stopped suddenly with a wild laugh. The *bonde* had listened to her ravings with something of horror, his ruddy cheeks growing paler.

“By the gods, this is strange!” he muttered. “She seems to speak of my wife,—yet what can she know of her?”

For some moments there was silence. Lovisa seemed to have exhausted her strength. Presently, however, she put aside her straggling white hairs from her forehead, and demanded fiercely—

“Where is my grandchild? Where is Britta?”

Neither Güldmar nor Ulrika made any reply. But Britta’s name recalled the old woman to herself, and when she spoke again it was quite collectedly, and in her usual harsh voice. She seemed to forget all that she had just uttered, for she turned her eyes upon the *bonde*, as though she had but then perceived him.

“So you are come, Olaf Gldmar!” she said.
 “It is well,—for the hand of Death is upon me.”

“It is well, indeed, if I can be of service, Lovisa Elsland,” responded Gldmar, “though I am but a sorry consoler, holding, as I do, that death is the chief blessing, and in no way to be regretted at any time. Moreover, when the body grows too weak to support the soul, ’tis as well to escape from it with what speed we may.”

“Escape—escape? Where?” asked Lovisa.
 “From the worm that dieth not? From the devouring flame that is never quenched? From the torturing thirst and heat and darkness of hell, who shall escape?”

“Nay, if that is all the comfort thy creed can give thee,” said the *bonde*, with a half-smile, “’tis but a poor staff to lean on!”

Lovisa looked at him mockingly. “And is thine so strong a prop to thy pride?” she asked disdainfully. “Has Odin so endowed thee that thou shouldst boast of him? Listen to me, Olaf Gldmar—I have but little strength remaining, and I must speak briefly. Thy wife——”

“What of her?” said the *bonde* hastily.
 “Thou knewest her not.”

“I knew her,” said Lovisa steadily, “as the lightning knows the tree it withers—as the sea knows the frail boat it wrecks for sport on a windy day. Thou haughty Olaf! I knew her well—even as the broken heart knows its destroyer!”

Göldmar looked perplexedly at Ulrika. "Surely she raves again?" he said. Ulrika was silent.

"Rave? Tell him I do not rave!" cried Lovisa, rising in her bed to utter her words with more strength and emphasis. "Maybe I have raved, but that is past! The Lord, who will judge and condemn my soul, bear witness that I speak the truth! Olaf Göldmar, rememberest thou the days when we were young?"

"'Tis long ago, Lovisa!" replied the *bonde* with brief gentleness.

"Long ago? It seems but yesterday! But yesterday I saw the world all radiant with hope and joy and love—love that to you was a mere pastime—but with *me*——" She shuddered and seemed to lose herself in a maze of dreary recollections. "Love!" she presently muttered—"love is strong as death,—jealousy is cruel as the grave—the coals thereof are coals of fire which hath a most vehement flame!' Even so! You, Olaf Göldmar, have forgotten what I remember,—that once in that yesterday of youth, you called me fair,—once your lips branded mine! Could I forget that kiss? Think you a Norse woman, bred in the shadow of the constant mountains, forgets the first thrill of passion wakened in her soul? Light women of those lands where the sun ever shines on fresh follies, may count their loves by the score,—but with us of the North, *one* love

suffices to fill a lifetime. And was not my life filled? Filled to overflowing with bitterness and misery! For I loved you, proud Olaf!—I loved you——” The *bonde* uttered an exclamation of incredulous astonishment. Lovisa fixed her eyes on him with a dark scorn. “Yes, I loved you,—scoffer and unbeliever as you were and are!—accursed of God and man! I loved you in spite of all that was said against you—nay, I would have forsaken my creed for yours, and condemned my soul to the everlasting burning for your sake! I loved you as *she*—that pale, fair, witch-like thing you wedded, could never love——” Her voice died away in a sort of despairing wail, and she paused.

“By my soul!” said the *bonde*, astounded, and stroking his white beard in some embarrassment. “I never knew of this! It is true that in the hot days of youth, mischief is often done unwittingly. But why trouble yourself with these memories, Lovisa? If it be any comfort,—believe me, I am sorry harm ever came to you through my thoughtless jesting——”

“It matters not!” and Lovisa regarded him with a strange and awful smile. “I have had my revenge!” She stopped abruptly,—then went on—“’Twas a fair bride you chose, Olaf Gldmar—child of an alien from these shores,—Thelma, with the treacherous laughter and light of the South in her eyes and smile! And I, who had known love,

made friends with hate——” She checked herself, and looked full at the *bonde* with a fiendish joy sparkling in her eyes. “She whom you wedded—she whom you loved so well,—how soon she died!”

There was something so suggestive and dreadful in the expression of her face as she said this, that the stout heart of the old *bonde*, pulsated more quickly with a sudden vague distrust and dread. She gave him no time to speak, but laying one yellow, claw-like hand on his arm, and raising her voice to a sort of yell, exclaimed triumphantly—

“Yes, yes! how soon she died! Bravely, bravely done! And no one ever guessed the truth—no one ever knew I *killed* her!”

Göldmar uttered a sharp cry, and shook himself free from her touch. In the same instant his hand flew to the hilt of the hunting-knife in his girdle.

“*Killed* her! By the gods——”

Ulrika sprang before him. “Shame!” she cried sternly. “She is dying!”

“Too slowly for me!” exclaimed the *bonde* furiously.

“Peace—peace!” implored Ulrika. “Let her speak!”

“Strike, Olaf Göldmar!” said Lovisa, in a deep voice, harsh, but all untremulous—“Strike, pagan, with whom the law of blood is supreme

—strike to the very centre of my heart—I do not fear you! I killed her, I say—and therein I, the servant of the Lord, was justified! Think you that the Most High hath not commanded His elect to utterly destroy and trample underfoot their enemies?—and is not vengeance mine as well as thine, accursed slave of Odin?”

A spasm of pain here interrupted her—she struggled violently for breath—and Ulrika supported her. Güldmar stood motionless, white with restrained fury, his eyes blazing. Recovering by slow degrees, Lovisa once more spoke—her voice was weaker, and sounded a long way off.

“Yea, the Lord hath been on my side!” she said, and the hideous blasphemy rattled in her throat as it was uttered. “Listen,—and hear how He delivered mine enemy into my hands. I watched her always—I followed her many and many a time, though she never saw me. I knew her favourite path across the mountains,—it led past a rocky chasm. On the edge of that chasm there was a broad, flat stone, and there she would sit often, reading, or watching the fishing-boats on the Fjord, and listening to the prattle of her child. I used to dream of that stone, and wonder if I could loosen it! It was strongly embedded in the earth—but each day I went to it—each day I moved it! Little by little I worked—till a mere touch would have set it hurling downwards,—yet it looked as firm as ever.”

Göldmar uttered a fierce ejaculation of anguish—he put one hand to his throat as though he were stifling. Lovisa, watching him, smiled vindictively, and continued—

“When I had done all I could do, I lay in wait for her, hoping and praying—my hour came at last! It was a bright sunny morning—a little bird had been twittering above the very place—as it flew away, *she* approached—a book was in her hand,—her child followed her at some little distance off. Fortune favoured me—a cluster of pansies had opened their blossoms a few inches below the stone,—she saw them,—and, light as a bird, sprang on it and reached forward to gather them—ah!”—and the wretched woman clapped her hands and broke into malignant laughter—“I can hear her quick shriek now—the crash of stones and the crackle of branches as she fell down,—down to her death! Presently the child came running,—it was too young to understand—it sat down patiently waiting for its mother. How I longed to kill it! but it sang to itself like the bird that had flown away, and I could not! But *she* was gone—*she* was silent for ever—the Lord be praised for all His mercies! Was she smiling, Olaf Göldmar, when you found her—*dead?*”

A strange solemnity shadowed the *bonde's* features. He turned his eyes upon her steadily.

“Blessing and honour be to the gods of my fathers!” he said—“I found her—*living!*”

The change that came over Lovisa's face at these words was inexpressibly awful—she grew livid, and her lips twitched convulsively.

“Living—living!” she gasped.

“Living!” repeated Gldmar sternly. “Vile hag! Your purpose was frustrated! Your crime destroyed her beauty and shortened her days—but she lived—lived for ten sweet, bitter years, hidden away from all eyes save mine,—mine that never grew tired of looking in her patient, heavenly face! Ten years I held her as one holds a jewel—and, when she died, her death was but a falling asleep in these fond arms——”

Lovisa raised herself with a sharp cry, and wrung her hands together—

“Ten years—ten years!” she moaned. “I thought her dead—and she lived on,—beloved and loving all the while. O God, God! why hast thou made a mockery of Thy servant!” She rocked herself to and fro—then looked up with an evil smile. “Nay, but she *suffered*! That was best. It is worse to suffer than to die. Thank God, she *suffered*!”

“Ay, she suffered!” said Gldmar fiercely, scarce able to restrain himself from seizing upon the miserable old woman and shaking the sinking life out of her—“And had I but guessed who caused her sufferings, by the sword of Odin, I would have——”

Ulrika laid her hand on his suddenly upraised arm.

“Listen!” she whispered. A low wailing, like the cry of a distressed child, swept round and round the house, followed by a gust of wind and a clattering shower of hailstones. A strange blue light leaped up from the sparkling log fire, and cast an unearthly glow through the room. A deep stillness ensued.

Then—steady and clear and resonant—a single sound echoed through the air, like a long note played on an exceedingly sweet silver trumpet. It began softly—swelled to a *crescendo*—then died delicately away. Gldmar raised his head—his face was full of rapt and expectant gravity,—his action, too, was somewhat singular, for he drew the knife from his girdle and kissed the hilt solemnly, returning it immediately to its sheath. At the same moment Lovisa uttered a loud cry, and, flinging the coverings from her, strove to rise from her bed. Ulrika held her firmly,—she struggled feebly yet determinedly, gazing the while with straining, eager, glassy eyes into the gloom of the opposite corner.

“Darkness—darkness!” she muttered hoarsely,—“and the white white faces of dead things! There—there they lie!—all still, at the foot of the black chasm—their mouths move without sound—what—what are they saying? I cannot hear—ask them to speak louder—louder! Ah!” and she uttered a terrified scream that made the rafters ring. “They move!—they stretch out

their hands—cold, cold hands!—they are drawing me down to them—down—down—to that darkness! Hold me—hold me! don't let me go to them—Lord, Lord be merciful to me—let me live—live——” Suddenly she drew back in deadly horror, gesticulating with her tremulous lean hands as though to shut away the sight of some loathsome thing unveiled to her view. “Who is it”—she asked in an awful, shuddering whisper—“Who is it that says there is no hell? *I see it!*” Still retreating backwards, backwards—the clammy dews of death darkening her affrighted countenance,—she turned her glazing eyes for the last time on Gldmar. Her lips twitched into a smile of dreadful mockery.

“May—thy gods—reward thee—Olaf Gldmar—even—as mine—are—rewarding—*me!*”

And with these words, her head dropped heavily on her breast. Ulrika laid her back on her pillow, a corpse. The stern, cruel smile froze slowly on her dead features—gradually she became, as it were, a sort of ancient cenotaph, carved to resemble old age combined with unrepenting evil—the straggling white hair that rested on her wrinkled forehead looking merely like snow fallen on sculptured stone.

“Good Lord, have mercy on her soul!” murmured Ulrika piously, as she closed the upward staring eyes, and crossed the withered hands.

“Good Devil, claim thine own!” said Gld-

mar, with proudly lifted arm and quivering, disdainful lips. "Thou foolish woman! Thinkest thou thy Lord makes place for murderers in His heaven? If so, 'tis well I am not bound there! Only the just can tread the pathway to Valhalla,—'tis a better creed!"

Ulrika looked at his superb, erect figure and lofty head, and a strangely anxious expression flitted across her dull countenance.

"Nay, *bonde*, we do not believe that the Lord accepteth murderers, without they repent themselves of their backslidings,—but if with penitence they turn to Him even at the eleventh hour, haply they may be numbered among the elect."

Güldmar's eyes flashed. "I know not thy creed, woman, nor care to learn it! But, all the same, thou art deceived in thy vain imaginings. The Eternal Justice cannot err—call that justice Christ or Odin as thou wilt. I tell you, the soul of the innocent bird that perishes in the drifting snow is near and dear to its Creator—but the tainted soul that had yonder vile body for its tenement, was but a flame of the evil one, and accursed from the beginning,—it must return to him from whom it came. A heaven for such as she? Nay—rather the lowest circle of the furthest and fiercest everlasting fires—and thither do I commend her! Farewell!"

Rapidly muffling himself up in his wraps, he strode out of the house. He sprang into his

sledge, throwing a generous gratuity to the small Laplander who had taken charge of it, and who now ventured to inquire—

“Has the good Lovisa left us?”

Güldmar burst into a hard laugh. “*Good!* By my soul! The folks of Talvig take up murderers for saints and criminals for guides! ’Tis a wild world! Yes—she has gone—where all such blessed ones go—to—heaven!” He shook his clenched fist in the air—then hastily gathering up the reins, prepared to start.

The Lapp, after the manner of his race, was easily frightened, and cowered back, terrified at the *bonde’s* menacing gesture and fierce tone,—but quickly bethinking himself of the liberal fee he clutched in his palm, he volunteered a warning to this kingly old man with the streaming white hair and beard, and the keen eyes that were already fixed on the dark sweep of the rough, uneven road winding towards the Altenfjord.

“There is a storm coming, Jarl Güldmar!” he stammered.

Güldmar turned his head. “Why call me *Jarl?*” he demanded half angrily. “’Tis a name I wear not.”

He touched the reindeer lightly with his long whip—the sensitive beasts started and sprang forward.

Once more the Lapp exclaimed, with increased excitement and uncouth gestures—

“Storm is coming!—wide—dark, deep! See how the sky stoops with the hidden snow!”

He pointed to the north, and there, low on the horizon, was a lurid red gleam like a smouldering fire, while just above it a greenish blackness of cloud hung heavy and motionless. Towards the central part of the heavens two or three stars shone with frosty brightness, and through a few fleecy ribbons of greyish mist glimmered the uncertain promise of a faint moon.

Göldmar smiled slightly. “Storm coming?” he answered almost gaily. “That is well! Storm and I are old friends, my lad! Good night!”

Once more he touched his horned steeds, and with a jingle-jangle of musical bells and a scudding, slippery hissing across the hard snow, the sledge sped off with fairy-like rapidity, and in a few moments its one little guiding lantern disappeared in the darkness like a suddenly extinguished candle.

The Lapp stood pondering and gazing after it, with the *bonde's* money in his palm, till the cold began to penetrate even his thick skin-clothing and his fat little body, well anointed with whale-oil though it was,—and becoming speedily conscious of this, he scampered with extraordinary agility, considering the dimensions of his snow-shoes, into the hut where he had his dwelling, relating to all who chose to hear,

the news of old Lovisa Elsland's death, and the account of his brief interview with the dreaded but generous pagan.

Ulrika, watching by the corpse of her aged friend, was soon joined by others bent on sharing her vigil, and the house was presently filled with women's religious wailings and prayers for the departed. To all the curious inquiries that were made concerning the cause of Lovisa's desire to see the *bonde* before she died, Ulrika vouchsafed no reply,—and the villagers, who stood somewhat in awe of her as a woman of singular godliness and discreet reputation, soon refrained from asking any more questions. An ambitious young Lutheran preacher came, and, addressing himself to all assembled, loudly extolled the superhuman virtues of the dead “Mother of the village,” as Lovisa had been called,—amid the hysterical weeping and moaning of the mourners, he begged them to look upon her “venerated face,” and observe “the smile of God's own peace engraven there,”—and amid all his eloquence, and the shrieking excitement of his fanatical hearers, Ulrika alone was silent.

She sat stern and absorbed, with set lips and lowered eyelids at the head of the bed whereon the corpse was now laid out, grimly rigid,—with bound-up jaws, and clasped fingers like stiff, dried bones. Her thoughts dwelt gloomily and intently on Gldmar's words—“The Eternal Justice cannot

err." Eternal Justice! What sentence would Eternal Justice pass upon the crime of murder?—or attempt to murder? "I am guilty," the unhappy woman reflected, with a strong shudder chilling her veins, "guilty even as Lovisa! I tried to kill my child—I thought, I hoped it was dead! It was not my meaning that it should live. And this Eternal Justice, maybe, will judge the intention more than the crime. O Lord, Lord! save my soul! Teach me how to escape from the condemning fires of Thine anger!" Thus she prayed and wrestled with her accusing self in secret—despair and fear raging in her heart, though not a flicker of her inward agitation betrayed itself outwardly on her stolid, expressionless features.

Meanwhile the wind rose to a tearing, thunderous gale, and the night, already so dark, darkened yet more visibly. Olaf Güldmar, driving swiftly homewards, caught the first furious gust of the storm that came rushing onward from the North Cape, and as it swooped sideways against his light sledge, he was nearly hurled from his seat by the sudden violence of the shock. He settled himself more firmly, encouraging with a cheery word the startled reindeer, who stopped short,—stretching out their necks and sniffing the air, their hairy sides heaving with the strain of trotting against the blast, and the smoke of their breath steaming upwards in the frosty air like

white vapour. The way lay now through a narrow defile bordered with tall pines,—and as the terrified animals, recovering, shook the tinkling bells on their harness, and once more resumed their journey, the road was comparatively sheltered, and the wind seemed to sink as suddenly as it rose. There was a hush—an almost ominous silence.

The sledge glided more slowly between the even lines of upright giant trees, crowned with icicles and draped in snow,—the *bonde* involuntarily loosened the reins of his elfin steeds, and again returned to those painful and solemn musings, from which the stinging blow of the tempest had for a moment roused him. The proud heart of the old man ached bitterly. What! All these years had passed, and he, the descendant of a hundred Vikings, had been cheated of justice! He had seen his wife,—the treasured darling of his days, suffering,—dying, inch by inch, year by year, with all her radiant beauty withered,—and he had never known her destroyer! Her fall from the edge of the chasm had been deemed by them both an accident, and yet—this wretched Lovisa Elsland—mad with misplaced, disappointed passion, jealousy, and revenge,—had lived on to the extreme of life, triumphant and unsuspected.

“I swear the gods have played me false in this!” he muttered, lifting his eyes in a sort of fierce appeal to the motionless pine-tops stiff with frost. The

mystery of the old hag's hatred of his daughter was now made clear—she resembled her mother too closely to escape Lovisa's malice. He remembered the curse she had called down upon the innocent girl,—how it was she who had untiringly spread abroad the report among the superstitious people of the place, that Thelma was a witch whose presence was a blight upon the land,—how she had decoyed her into the power of Mr. Dyceworthy—all was plain—and, notwithstanding her deliberate wickedness, she had lived her life without punishment! This was what made Gldmar's blood burn, and pulses thrill. He could not understand why the Higher Powers had permitted this error of justice, and, like many of his daring ancestors, he was ready to fling defiance in the very face of Odin, and demand—"Why,—O thou drowsy god, nodding over thy wine-cups,—why didst thou do this thing?"

Utter fearlessness,—bodily and spiritual,—fearlessness of past, present, or future, life or death,—was Gldmar's creed. The true Norse warrior spirit was in him—had he been told, on heavenly authority, that the lowest range of the "Nastrond" or Scandinavian Hell, awaited him, he would have accepted his fate with unflinching firmness. The indestructibility of the soul, and the certainty that it must outlive even centuries of torture, and triumph gloriously in the end, was the core of the faith he professed. As he glanced upwards, the

frozen tree-tops, till then rigidly erect, swayed slightly from side to side with a crackling sound—but he paid no heed to this slight warning of a fresh attack from the combative storm that was gathering together and renewing its scattered forces. He began to think of his daughter, and the grave lines on his face relaxed and softened.

“’Tis all fair sailing for the child,” he mused. “For that I should be grateful! The world has been made a soft nest for my bird,—I should not complain,—my own time is short.” His former anger calmed a little—the brooding irritation of his mind became gradually soothed.

“Rose of my heart!” he whispered, tenderly apostrophizing the memory of his wife,—that lost jewel of love, whose fair body lay enshrined in the king’s tomb by the Fjord. “Wrongfully done to death as thou wert, and brief time as we had for loving;—in spite of thy differing creed, I feel that I shall meet thee soon! Yes—in the world beyond the stars, they will bring thee to me in Valhalla,—wheresoever thou art, thou wilt not refuse to come! The gods themselves cannot unfasten the ties of love between us!”

As he half thought, half uttered, these words, the reindeer again stopped abruptly, rearing their antlered heads and panting heavily. Hark! what was that? A clear, far-reaching note of music seemingly awakened from the waters of the Fjord and rising upwards, upwards, with bell-like

distinctness ! Gldmar leaned from his motionless sledge and listened in awe—it was the same sound he had before heard as he stood by Lovisa Elsland’s death-bed—and was in truth nothing but a strong current of wind blowing through the arched and honeycombed rocks by the sea, towards the higher land,—creating the same effect as though one should breathe forcibly through a pipe-like instrument of dried and hollow reeds,—and being rendered more resonant by the intense cold, it bore a striking similarity to the full blast of a war-trumpet. For the worshipper of Odin, it had a significant and supernatural meaning,—and he repeated his former action—that of drawing the knife from his girdle and kissing the hilt. “If Death is near me,” he said in a loud voice, “I bid it welcome ! The gods know that I am ready !”

He waited as though expecting some answer—but there was a brief, absolute silence. Then, with a wild shriek and riotous uproar, the circling tempest,—before uncertain and vacillating in its wrath,—pounced, eagle-like, downwards and grasped the mountains in its talons,—the strong pines rocked backwards and forwards as though bent by Herculean hands, crashing their frosted branches madly together:—the massive clouds in the sky opened and let fall their burden of snow. Down came the large fleecy flakes, twisting dizzily round and round in a white waltz to the whirl of the wind—faster—faster—heavier and thicker, till

there seemed no clear space in the air. Gldmar urged on the reindeer, more anxious for their safety than his own—the poor beasts were fatigued, and the blinding snow confused them, but they struggled on patiently, encouraged by their master's voice and the consciousness that they were nearing home. The storm increased in fury—and a fierce gust of frozen sleet struck the sledge like a strong hammer-stroke, as it advanced through the rapidly deepening snow-drifts—its guiding lantern was extinguished. Gldmar did not stop to relight it—he knew he was approaching his farm, and he trusted to the instinct and sagacity of his steeds.

There was indeed but a short distance to go,—the narrow wooded defile opened out on two roads, one leading direct to Bosekop—the other, steep and tortuous, winding down to the shore of the Fjord—this latter passed the *bonde's* gate. Once out of the shadow of the pines, the way would be more distinctly seen,—the very reindeer seemed to be conscious of this, for they trotted more steadily, shaking their bells in even and rhythmical measure. As they neared the end of the long dark vista, a sudden bright-blue glare quivered and sprang wave-like across the snow—a fantastic storm-aurora that flashed and played among the feathery falling flakes of white till they looked like knots and clusters of sparkling jewels. The extreme point of the close defile was reached

at last, and here the landscape opened up wide, rocky and desolate—a weird picture,—with the heavy clouds above repeatedly stabbed through and through by the needle-pointed beams of the aurora borealis,—and the blank whiteness of the ground below. Just as the heads of the reindeer were turned into the homeward road, half of the aurora suddenly faded, leaving the other half still beating out its azure brilliance against the horizon. At the same instant, with abrupt swiftness, a dark shadow,—so dark as to seem almost palpable,—descended and fell directly in front of the advancing sledge—a sort of mist that appeared to block the way.

Güldmar leaned forward and gazed with eager, straining eyes into that drooping gloom—a shadow?—a mere vapour, with the Northern Lights glimmering through its murky folds? Ah no—no! For him it was something very different,—a heavenly phantasm, beautiful and grand, with solemn meaning! He saw a Maiden, majestically tall, of earnest visage and imperial mien,—her long black hair streamed loose upon the wind—in one hand she held a shining shield—in the other a lifted spear! On her white brow rested a glittering helmet,—her bosom heaved beneath a corslet of pale gold—she fixed her divine, dark eyes full upon his face and smiled! With a cry of wonder and ecstasy the old man fell back in his sledge,—the reins dropped from his hands,

—"The Valkyrie! the Valkyrie!" he exclaimed.

A mere breathing space, and the shadow vanished,—the aurora came out again in unbroken splendour—and the reindeer, feeling no restraint upon them, and terrified by something in the air, or the ceaseless glitter of the lights in the sky, started off precipitately at full gallop. The long reins trailed loosely over their backs, lashing their sides as they ran—Güldmar, recovering from his momentary awe and bewilderment, strove to seize them, but in vain. He called, he shouted,—the frightened animals were utterly beyond control, and dashed madly down the steep road, swinging the sledge from side to side, and entangling themselves more and more with the loose reins, till, irritated beyond endurance, confused and blinded by the flash of the aurora and the dizzy whirl of the swiftly falling snow, they made straight for a steep bank,—and before the *bonde* had time to realize the situation and jump from the sledge—crash! down they went with a discordant jangle of bells, their hoofs splitting a thin, sharp shelf of ice as they leaped forward,—dragging the light vehicle after them, and twisting it over and over till it was a mere wreck,—and throwing out its occupant head foremost against a jagged stone.

Then more scared than ever, they strove to clamber out of the gully into which they had recklessly sprung, but, foiled in these attempts,

they kicked, plunged, and reared,—trampling heedlessly over the human form lying helpless among the shattered fragments of the sledge,—till tired out at last, they stood motionless, panting with terror. Their antlered heads cast fantastic patterns on the snow in the varying rose and azure radiance that rippled from the waving ribbons of the aurora,—and close to them, his slowly trickling life-blood staining the white ground,—his hair and beard glittering in the light like frosted silver,—his eyes fast closed as though he slept,—lay Olaf Gldmar unconscious—dying. The spear of the Valkyrie had fallen !

CHAPTER II.

“Bury me not when I am dead,—
Lay me not down in a dusty bed;
I could not bear the life down there,
With the wet worms crawling about my hair!”

ERIC MACKAY.

LONG hours passed, and the next day dawned, if the dim twilight that glimmered faintly across the Altenfjord could be called a dawn. The snow-fall had ceased,—the wind had sunk—there was a frost-bound, monotonous calm. The picturesque dwelling of the *bonde* was white in every part, and fringed with long icicles,—icicles drooped from its sheltering porch and gabled windows—the deserted dove-cote on the roof was a miniature ice-palace, curiously festooned with thin threads and crested pinnacles of frozen snow. Within the house there was silence,—the silence of approaching desolation. In the room where Thelma used to sit and spin, a blazing fire of pine sparkled on the walls, casting ruddy outward flashes through the frost-covered lattice-windows,—and here, towards the obscure noon, Olaf Gldmar awoke from

his long trance of insensibility. He found himself at home, stretched on his own bed, and looked about him vacantly. In the earnest and watchful countenance that bent above his pillow, he slowly recognized his friend, companion, and servant, Valdemar Svensen, and though returning consciousness brought with it throbs of agonizing pain, he strove to smile, and feebly stretched out his hand. Valdemar grasped it—kissed it—and in spite of his efforts to restrain his emotion, a sigh, that was almost a groan, escaped him. The *bonde* smiled again,—then lay quiet for a few moments as though endeavouring to collect his thoughts. Presently he spoke—his voice was faint yet distinct.

“What has happened, Valdemar?” he asked. “How is it that the strength has departed from me?”

Svensen dropped on his knees by the bedside. “An accident, my Lord Olaf,” he began falteringly.

Güldmar’s eyes suddenly lightened. “Ah, I remember!” he said. “The rush down the valley—I remember all!” He paused, then added gently, “And so the end has come, Valdemar!”

Svensen uttered a passionate exclamation of distress.

“Let not my lord say so!” he murmured appealingly, with the air of a subject entreating favour from a king. “Or, if it must be, let me also travel with thee wherever thou goest!”

Olaf Gldmar's gaze rested on him with a musing tenderness.

"'Tis a far journey," he said simply. "And thou art not summoned." He raised his arm to test its force—for one second it was uplifted,—then it fell powerless at his side. "I am conquered!" he went on with a cheerful air. "The fight is over, Valdemar! Surely I have had a long battle, and the time for rest and reward is welcome." He was silent for a little, then continued, "Tell me—how,—where didst thou find me? It seems I had a dream, strange and glorious—then came a rushing sound of wheels and clanging bells,—and after that, a long, deep silence."

Speaking in low tones, Valdemar briefly related the events of the past night. How he had heard the reindeer's gallop down the road, and the quick jangling of the bells on their harness, and had concluded that the *bonde* was returning home at extraordinary speed,—how these sounds had suddenly and unaccountably ceased,—how, after waiting for some time, and hearing nothing more, he had become greatly alarmed, and, taking a pine-torch, had gone out to see what had occurred,—how he had found the reindeer standing by the broken sledge in the gully, and how, after some search, he had finally discovered his master, lying half-covered by the snow, and grievously injured. How he had lifted him and carried him into the house,

“By my soul!” interrupted the *bonde* cheerfully, “thou must have found me no light weight, Valdemar! See what a good thing it is to be a man—with iron muscles, and strong limbs, and hardy nerve! By the Hammer of Thor! the glorious gift of strong manhood is never half appreciated! As for me—I am a man no longer!”

He sighed a little, and, passing his sinewy hand across his brow, lay back exhausted. He was racked by bodily torture, but,—unflinching old hero as he was,—gave no sign of the agonizing pain he suffered. Valdemar Svensen had risen from his knees, and now stood gazing at him with yearning, miserable eyes, his brown, weather-beaten visage heavily marked with lines of grief and despair. He knew that he was utterly powerless—that nothing could save the noble life that was ebbing slowly away before him. His long and varied experience as a sailor, pilot, and traveller in many countries had given him some useful knowledge of medicine and surgery, and if anything was possible to be done, he could do it. But in this case no medical skill would have been availing—the old man’s ribs were crushed in and his spine injured,—his death was a question of but a few hours at the utmost, if so long.

“Olaf the King!” muttered the *bonde* presently. “True! They make no mistakes yonder,—they know each warrior by name and rank—’tis only in this world we are subject to error. This world!

By the gods! . . . 'tis but a puff of thistle-down,—or a light mist floating from the sunset to the sea!”

He made a vigorous attempt to raise himself from his pillow—though the excruciating anguish caused by his movement, made him wince a little and grow paler.

“Wine, Valdemar! Fill the horn cup to the brim and bring it to me—I must have strength to speak—before I depart—on the last great journey.”

Obediently and in haste, Svensen filled the cup he asked for with old *Lacrima Christi*, of which there was always a supply in this far Northern abode, and gave it to him, watching him with a sort of superstitious reverence as he drained off its contents and returned it empty.

“Ah! That warms this freezing blood of mine,” he said, the lustre flashing back into his eyes. “’Twill find fresh force to flow a brief while longer. Valdemar—I have little time to spend with thee—I feel death *here*,”—and he slightly touched his chest—“cold—cold and heavy. ’Tis nothing—a passing, chilly touch that sweeps away the world! But the warmth of a new, strong life awaits me—a life of never-ending triumph! The doors of Valhalla stand wide open—I heard the trumpet-call last night—I saw the dark-haired Valkyrie! All is well—and my soul is full of rejoicing. Valdemar—there is but one thing now thou hast to do for me,—the one great

service thou hast sworn to render. *Fulfil thine oath!* ”

Valdemar's brown cheek blanched,—his lips quivered,—he flung up his hands in wild appeal. The picturesque flow of his native speech gained new fervour and eloquence as he spoke.

“Not yet—not yet, my lord!” he cried passionately. “Wait but a little—there is time. Think for one moment—think! Would it not be well for my lord to sleep the last sleep by the side of his beloved Thelma—the star of the dark mountains—the moonbeam of the night of his life? Would not peace enwrap him there as with a soft garment, and would not his rest be lulled by the placid murmur of the sea? For the days of old time and storm and victory are past—and the dead slumber as stones in the silent pathways—why would my lord depart in haste as though he were wrathful, from the land he has loved?—from the vassal who implores his pardon for pleading against a deed he dares not do!”

“Dares not—dares not!” cried the *bönde*, springing up half-erect from his couch, in spite of pain, and looking like some enraged old lion with his tossed, streaming hair and glittering eyes. “Serf as thou art, and coward! Thinkest thou an oath such as thine is but a thread of hair, to be snapped at thy pleasure? Wilt thou brave the wrath of the gods and the teeth of the Wolf of Nastrond? As surely as the seven stars shine on

the white brow of Thor, evil shall be upon thee if thou refusest to perform the vow thou hast sworn! And shall a slave have strength to resist the dying curse of a King?"

The pride, the supreme authority,—the magnificent strength of command that flushed the old man's features, were extraordinary and almost terrible in their impressive grandeur. If he indeed believed himself by blood a king and a descendant of kings,—he could not have shown a more forcible display of personal sovereignty. The effect of his manner on Valdemar was instantaneous,—the superstitious fears of that bronzed sea-wanderer were easily aroused. His head drooped—he stretched out his hands imploringly.

"Let not my lord curse his servant," he faltered. "It was but a tremor of the heart that caused my tongue to speak foolishly. I am ready—I have sworn—the oath shall be kept to its utmost end!"

Olaf Gldmar's threatening countenance relaxed, and he fell back on his pillows.

"It is well!" he said feebly and somewhat indistinctly. "Thy want of will maddened me—I spoke and lived in times that are no more—days of battle—and—glory—that are gone—from men—for ever. More wine, Valdemar!—I must keep a grip on this slippery life—and yet—I wander—wander into the—night——"

His voice ceased, and he sank into a swoon—a swoon that was like death. His breathing was scarcely perceptible, and Svensen, alarmed at his appearance, forced some drops of wine between his set lips, and chafed his cold hands with anxious solicitude. Slowly and very gradually he recovered consciousness and intelligence, and presently asked for a pencil and paper to write a few farewell words to his daughter. In the grief and bewilderment of the time, Valdemar entirely forgot to tell him that a letter from Thelma had arrived for him on the previous afternoon while he was away at Talvig,—and was even now on the shelf above the chimney, awaiting perusal. Gldmar, ignorant of this, began to write slowly and with firmness, disregarding his rapidly sinking strength. Scarcely had he begun the letter, however, than he looked up meaningly at Svensen, who stood waiting beside him.

“The time grows very short,” he said imperatively. “Prepare everything quickly—go! Fear not—I shall live to see thee return—and to bless thee for thy faithful service.”

As he uttered these words he smiled;—and with one wistful, yearning look at him, Valdemar obediently and instantly departed. He left the house, carrying with him a huge pile of dry brushwood, and with the air of a man strung up to prompt action, rapidly descended the sloping path, thick with hardened snow, that led down-

wards to the Fjord. On reaching the shore, he looked anxiously about him. There was nothing in sight but the distant, twinkling lights of Bosekop—the Fjord itself was like a black pool,—so still that even the faintest murmur of its rippling against the *bonde's* own private pier could be heard,—the tide was full up.

Out of the reach of the encroaching waters, high and dry on the beach, was Gldmar's brig, the *Valkyrie*, transformed by the fingers of the frost into a white ship, fantastically draped with threads of frozen snow and pendent icicles. She was placed on a descending plank, to which she was attached by a chain and rope pulley,—so that at any time of the weather or tide she could be moved glidingly downwards into deep water—and this was what Valdemar occupied himself in doing. It was a hard task. The chains were stiff with the frost,—but, after some patient and arduous striving, they yielded to his efforts, and, with slow clank and much creaking complaint, the vessel slid reluctantly down and plunged forward, afloat at last. Holding her ropes, Valdemar sprang to the extreme edge of the pier and fastened her there, and then getting on board, he untied and began to hoist the sails. This was a matter of the greatest difficulty, but it was gradually and successfully accomplished; and a strange sight the *Valkyrie* then presented, resting nearly motionless on the black Fjord,—her stretched and frosted

canvas looking like sheeted pearl fringed with silver,—her masts white with encrusted snow, and topped with pointed icicles. Leaving her for a moment, Valdemar quickly returned, carrying the pile of dry brushwood he had brought,—he descended with this into the hold of the ship, and returned without it. Glancing once more nervously about him, he jumped from the deck to the pier—thence to the shore—and as he did so a long dark wave rolled up and broke at his feet. The capricious wind had suddenly arisen,—and a moaning whisper coming from the adjacent hills gave warning of another storm.

Valdemar hurriedly retraced his steps back to the house,—his work with the *Valkyrie* had occupied him more than an hour—the *bonde*, his friend and master, might have died during his absence! There was a cold sickness at his heart—his feet seemed heavy as lead, and scarcely able to carry him along quickly enough—to his credulous and visionary mind, the hovering shadow of death seemed everywhere,—in every crackling twig he brushed against,—in every sigh of the wakening gale that rustled among the bare pines. To his intense relief he found Gldmar lying calmly back among his pillows,—his eyes well open and clear, and an expression of perfect peace upon his features. He smiled as he saw his servant enter.

“All is in readiness?” he asked.

Valdemar bent his head in silent assent.

The *bonde's* face lightened with extraordinary rapture.

"I thank thee, old friend!" he said in low but glad accents. "Thou knowest I could not be at peace in any other grave. I have suffered in thine absence,—the sufferings of the body that, being yet strong in spite of age, is reluctant to take leave of life. But it is past! I am as one numbed with everlasting frost,—and now I feel no pain. And my mind is like a bird that poises for a while over past and present, ere soaring into the far future. There are things I must yet say to thee, Valdemar,—give me thy close hearing, for my voice is weak."

Svensen drew closer, and stood in the humble attitude of one who waits a command from some supreme chief.

"This letter," went on the old man, giving him a folded paper, "is to the child of my heart, my Thelma. Send it to her—when—I am gone. It will not grieve her, I hope—for, as far as I could find words, I have expressed therein nothing but joy—the joy of a prisoner set free. Tell her, that with all the strength of my perishing body and escaping soul, I blessed her! . . . her and the husband in whose arms she rests in safety." He raised his trembling hands solemnly—"The gods of my fathers and their attendant spirits have her young life in their glorious keeping!—the joy of love and purity and peace be on her innocent head for ever!"

He paused,—the wind wailed mournfully round the house and shook the lattice with a sort of stealthy clatter, like a forlorn wanderer striving to creep in to warmth and shelter.

“Here, Valdemar,” continued the *bonde* presently, in fainter accents, at the same time handing him another paper. “Here are some scrawled lines—they are plainly set forth and signed—which make thee master of this poor place and all that it contains.”

A low, choked sob broke from Valdemar’s broad breast—he covered his face with his hands.

“Of what avail?” he murmured brokenly. “When my lord departs, I am alone and friendless!”

The *bonde* regarded him with kindly pity.

“Tears from thee, stout heart?” he inquired with a sort of grave wonder. “Weep for life, Valdemar—not for death! Alone and friendless? Not while the gods are in heaven! Cheer thee—thou art strong and in vigorous prime of manhood—why should not bright days come for thee——” He broke off with a gasp—a sudden access of pain convulsed him and rendered his breathing difficult. By sheer force of will he mastered the cruel agony, though great drops of sweat stood on his brow when he at last found voice to continue—

“I thought all suffering was past,” he said with a heroic smile. “This foolish flesh and blood of mine dies hard! But, as I was saying to

thee, Valdemar—the farm is thine, and all it holds—save some few trifles I have set down to be given to my child. There is little worth in what I leave thee—the soil is hard and ungrateful—the harvest uncertain, and the cattle few. Even the reindeer—didst thou say they were injured by their fall last night?—I—I forget,”

“No harm has come to them,” said Svensen hastily, seeing that the very effort of thinking was becoming too much for the old man. “They are safe and unhurt. Trouble not about these things!”

A strange, unearthly radiance transfigured Gldmar’s visage.

“Trouble is departing swiftly from me,” he murmured. “Trouble and I shall know each other no more!” His voice died away inarticulately, and he was silent a little space. Suddenly, and with a rush of vigour that seemed superhuman, he raised himself nearly erect, and pointed outwards with a commanding gesture.

“Bear me hence!” he cried in ringing tones. “Hence to the mountains and the sea!”

With a sort of mechanical, swift obedience, Valdemar threw open the door—the wind rushed coldly into the house, bringing with it large feathery flakes of snow. A hand-sledge stood outside the porch,—it was always there during the winter, being much used for visiting the outlying grounds of the farm,—and to this, Valdemar prepared to

carry the *bonde* in his herculean arms. But, on being lifted from his couch, the old man, filled with strange, almost delirious force, declared himself able to stand,—and, though suffering deadly anguish at every step, did in truth manage to reach and enter the sledge, strongly supported by Valdemar. There, however, he fainted—and his faithful servant, covering his insensible form with furs, thought he was dead. But there was now no time for hesitation,—dead or living, Olaf Gldmar's will was law to his vassal,—an oath had been made and must be kept. To propel the sledge down to the Fjord was an easy matter—how the rest of his duty was accomplished he never knew.

He was conscious of staggering blindly onward, weighted with a heavy, helpless burden,—he felt the slippery pier beneath his feet—the driving snow and the icy wind on his face,—but he was as one in a dream, realizing nothing plainly, till with a wild start, he seemed to awake—and lo! he stood on the glassy deck of the *Valkyrie* with the body of his “King” stretched senseless before him! Had he brought him there? He could not remember what he had done during the past few mad minutes,—the earth and sky whirled dizzily around him,—he could grasp nothing tangible in thought or memory. But there, most certainly, Olaf Gldmar lay,—his pallid face upturned, his hair and beard as white as the snow that clung to the masts

of his vessel—his hand clenched on the fur garment that enwrapped him as with a robe of royalty.

Dropping on his knees beside him, Valdemar felt his heart—it still throbbed fitfully and feebly. Watching the intense calm of the grand, rugged face, this stern, weather-worn sailor—this man of superstitious and heathen imaginations—gave way to womanish tears—tears that were the outcome of sincere and passionate grief. His love was of an exceptional type,—something like that of a faithful dog that refuses to leave the grave of its master,—he could contemplate death for himself with absolute indifference,—but not for the *bonde*, whose sturdy strength and splendid physique had seemed to defy all danger.

As he knelt and wept unrestrainedly, a soft change, a delicate transparency, swept over the dark bosom of the sky. Pale pink streaks glittered on the dusky horizon—darts of light began to climb upwards into the clouds, and to plunge downwards into the water,—the radiance spread, and gradually formed into a broad band of deep crimson, which burned with a fixed and intense glow—topaz-like rays flickered and streamed about it, as though uncertain what fantastic shape they should take to best display their brilliancy. This tremulous hesitation of varying colour did not last long; the whole jewel-like mass swept together, expanding and contracting with extraordinary swiftness for a few seconds—then, suddenly and clearly defined

in the sky, a Kingly Crown blazed forth—a Crown of perfect shape, its five points distinctly and separately outlined and flashing as with a million rubies and diamonds. The red lustre warmly tinged the pale features of the dying man, and startled Valdemar, who sprang to his feet and gazed at that mystic aureola with a cry of wonder. At the same moment Olaf Guldmar stirred, and began to speak drowsily without opening his eyes.

“Dawn on the sea!” he murmured. “The white waves gleam and sparkle beneath the prow, and the ship makes swift way through the waters! It is dawn in my heart—the dawn of love for thee and me, my Thelma—fear not! The rose of passion is a hardy flower that can bloom in the north as well as in the south, believe me! Thelma—Thelma!”

He suddenly opened his eyes, and realizing his surroundings, raised himself half-erect.

“Set sail!” he cried, pointing with a majestic motion of his arm to the diadem glittering in the sky. “Why do we linger? The wind favours us, and the tide sweeps forward—forward! See how the lights beckon from the harbour!” He bent his brows and looked almost angrily at Svensen. “Do what thou hast to do!” and his tones were sharp and imperious. “I must press on!”

An expression of terror, pain, and pity passed over the sailor’s countenance—for one instant he hesitated—the next, he descended into the hold of

the vessel. He was absent for a very little space,—but when he returned his eyes were wild as though he had been engaged in some dark and criminal deed. Olaf Gldmar was still gazing at the brilliancy in the heavens, which seemed to increase in size and lustre as the wind rose higher. Svensen took his hand—it was icy cold, and damp with the dews of death.

“Let me go with thee!” he implored, in broken accents. “I fear nothing! Why should I not venture also on the last voyage?”

Gldmar made a faint but decided sign of rejection.

“The Viking sails alone to the grave of his fathers!” he said, with a serene and proud smile. “Alone—alone! Neither wife, nor child, nor vassal may have place with him in his ship—even so have the gods willed it. Farewell, Valdemar! Loosen the ropes and let me go!—thou servest me ill—hasten—hasten—I am weary of waiting——”

His head fell back,—that mysterious shadow which darkens the face of the dying a moment before dissolution, was on him now.

Just then a strange, suffocating odour began to permeate the air—little wreaths of pale smoke made their slow way through the boards of the deck—and a fierce gust of wind, blowing seawards from the mountains, swayed the *Valkyrie* uneasily to and fro. Slowly, and with evident reluctance,

Svensen commenced the work of detaching her from the pier,—feeling instinctively all the while that his master's dying eyes were fixed upon him. When but one slender rope remained to be cast off, he knelt by the old man's side and whispered tremblingly that all was done. At the same moment a small, stealthy tongue of red flame curled upwards through the deck from the hold,—and Gldmar, observing this, smiled.

“I see thou hast redeemed thine oath,” he said, gratefully pressing Svensen's hand. “'Tis the last act of thine allegiance,—may the gods reward thy faithfulness! Peace be with thee!—we shall meet hereafter. Already the light shines from the Rainbow Bridge,—there,—there are the golden peaks of the hills and the stretch of the wide sea! Go, Valdemar!—delay no longer, for my soul is impatient—it burns, it struggles to be free! Go!—and—farewell!”

Stricken to the heart, and full of anguish,—yet serf-like in his submission and resignation to the inevitable,—Svensen kissed his master's hand for the last time. Then, with a sort of fierce sobbing groan, wrung from the very depths of his despairing grief, he turned resolutely away, and sprang off the vessel. Standing at the extreme edge of the pier, he let slip the last rope that bound her,—her sails filled and bulged outwards,—her cordage creaked, she shuddered on the water—lurched a little—then paused.

In that brief moment a loud triumphant cry rang through the air. Olaf Gldmar leaped upright on the deck as though lifted by some invisible hand, and confronted his terrified servant, who gazed at him in fascinated amazement and awe. His white hair gleamed like spun silver—his face was transfigured, and wore a strange, rapt look of pale yet splendid majesty—the dark furs that clung about him trailed in regal folds to his feet.

“Hark!” he cried, and his voice vibrated with deep and mellow clearness. “Hark to the thunder of the galloping hoofs!—see—see the glitter of the shield and spear! She comes—ah! Thelma! Thelma!” He raised his arms as though in ecstasy. “Glory!—joy!—Victory!”

And, like a noble tree struck down by lightning, he fell—dead!

Even as he fell, the *Valkyrie* plunged forward, driven forcibly by a swooping gust of wind, and scudded out to the Fjord like a wild bird flying before a tempest,—and, while she thus fled, a sheet of flame burst through her sides and blazed upwards, mingling a lurid, smoky glow with the clear crimson radiance of the still brilliant and crown-like aurora. Following the current, she made swift way across the dark water in the direction of the island of Seiland, and presently became a wondrous Ship of Fire! Fire flashed from her masts—fire folded up her spars and sails in a devouring embrace,—fire, that leaped and

played and sent forth a million showering sparks hissing into the waves beneath.

With beating heart and straining eyes, Valdemar Svensen crouched on the pier-head, watching, in mute agony, the burning vessel. He had fulfilled his oath!—that strange vow that had so sternly bound him,—a vow that was the outcome of his peculiar traditions and pagan creed.

Long ago, in the days of his youth,—full of enthusiasm for the worship of Odin and the past splendours of the race of the great Norse warriors,—he had chosen to recognize in Olaf Gldmar a true descendant of kings, who was by blood and birth, though not in power, himself a king,—and tracing his legendary history back to old and half-forgotten sources, he had proved, satisfactorily, to his own mind, that he, Svensen, must lawfully, and according to old feudal system, be this king's serf or vassal. And, growing more and more convinced of this in his dreamy and imaginative mind,—he had sworn a sort of mystic friendship and allegiance, which Gldmar had accepted, imposing on him, however, only one absolute command. This was that he should be given the "crimson shroud" and sea-tomb of his warlike ancestors,—for the idea that his body might be touched by strange hands, shut in a close coffin, and laid in the earth to moulder away to wormy corruption,—had been the one fantastic dread of the sturdy old pagan's life. And he had taken advantage of Svensen's

devotion and obedience to impress on him the paramount importance of his solitary behest.

“Let no hypocritical prayers be chanted over my dumb corpse,” he had said. “My blood would ooze from me at every pore were I touched by the fingers of a Lutheran! Save this goodly body that has served me so well from the inferior dust,—let the bright fire wither it, and the glad sea drown it,—and my soul, beholding its end afar off, shall rejoice and be satisfied. Swear by the wrath and thunder of the gods!—swear by the unflinching Hammer of Thor,—swear by the gates of Valhalla, and in the name of Odin!—and having sworn, the curse of all these be upon thee if thou fail to keep thy vow!”

And Valdemar had sworn. Now that the oath was kept—now that his promised obedience had been carried out to the extremest letter, he was as one stupefied. Shivering, yet regardless of the snow that began to fall thickly, he kept his post, staring, staring in drear fascination across the Fjord, where the *Valkyrie* drifted, now a mass of flame blown fiercely by the wind, and gleaming red through the flaky snow-storm.

The aurora borealis faded by gradual degrees, and the blazing ship was more than ever distinctly visible. She was seen from the shore of Bosekop, by a group of the inhabitants, who, rubbing their dull eyes, could not decide whether what they beheld was fire, or a new phase of the capricious,

ever-changing Northern Lights,—the rapidly descending snow rendering their vision bewildered and uncertain. Any way, they thought very little about it,—they had had excitement of another kind in the arrival of Ulrika from Talvig, bringing accounts of the godly Lovisa Elsland's death.

Moreover, an English steam cargo-boat, bound for the North Cape, had, just an hour previously, touched at their harbour, to land a passenger,—a mysterious woman closely veiled, who immediately on arrival had hired a sledge, and had bidden the driver to take her to the house of Olaf Guldmar, an eight miles' journey through the drifted snow. All this was intensely interesting to the good, stupid, gossiping fisher-folk of Bosekop,—so much so, indeed, that they scarcely paid any heed to the spectacle of the fiery ship swaying suggestively on the heaving water, and drifting rapidly away—away towards the frosted peaks of Seiland.

Further and further she receded,—the flames around her waving like banners in a battle—further and further still—till Valdemar Svensen, from his station on the pier, began to lose sight of her blazing timbers,—and, starting from his reverie, he ran rapidly from the shore, up through the garden paths to the farm-house, in order to gain the summit, and from that point of vantage, watch the last glimmering spark of the Viking's burial. As he reached the house,

he stopped short and uttered a wild exclamation. There,—under the porch hung with sparkling icicles,—stood Thelma! . . . Thelma,—her face pale and weary, yet smiling faintly,—Thelma with the glint of her wondrous gold hair escaping from under her hat, and glittering on the folds of her dark fur mantle.

“I have come home, Valdemar!” said the sweet, rich, penetrating voice. “Where is my father?”

As a man distraught, or in some dreadful dream, Valdemar approached her—the strangeness of his look and manner filled her with sudden fear,—he caught her hand and pointed to the dark Fjord—to the spot where gleamed a lurid waving wreath of flames.

“Fröken Thelma—he is *there*!” he gasped in choked, hoarse tones. “*There*—where the gods have called him!”

With a faint shriek of terror, Thelma’s blue eyes turned towards the shadowy water,—as she looked, a long up-twisting snake of fire appeared to leap from the perishing *Valkyrie*,—a snake that twined its glittering coils rapidly round and round on the wind, and as rapidly sank—down—down—to one glimmering spark which glowed redly like a floating lamp for a brief space,—and was then quenched for ever! The ship had vanished! Thelma needed no explanation,—she knew her father’s creed—she under-

stood all. Breaking loose from Valdemar's grasp, she rushed a few steps forward with arms outstretched on the bitter, snowy air.

"Father! father!" she cried aloud and sobbingly. "Wait for me!—it is I—Thelma!—I am coming—Father!"

The white world around her grew black—and, shuddering like a shot bird, she fell senseless.

Instantly Valdemar raised her from the ground, and holding her tenderly and reverently in his strong arms, carried her, as though she were a child, into the house. . . . The clouds darkened—the snow-storm thickened—the mountain-peaks, stern giants, frowned through their sleety veils at the arctic desolation of the land below them,—and over the charred and sunken corpse of the departed servant of Odin, sounded the solemn *De Profundis* of the sea.

CHAPTER III.

“The body is the storm ;
The soul the star beyond it, in the deep
Of Nature’s calm. And, yonder, on the steep,
The Sun of Faith, quiescent, round, and warm !”

LATE on that same night, the pious Ulrika was engaged in prayer. Prayer with her was a sort of fanatical wrestling of the body as well as of the soul,—she was never contented unless by means of groans and contortions she could manage to work up by degrees into a condition of hysteria resembling a mild epileptic attack, in which state alone she considered herself worthy to approach the Deity. On this occasion she had some difficulty to attain the desired result—her soul, as she herself expressed it, was “dry”—and her thoughts wandered,—though she pinched her neck and arms with the hard resoluteness of a sworn flagellant, and groaned, “Lord, have mercy on me a sinner !” with indefatigable earnestness. She was considerably startled in the midst of these energetic devotions by a sudden jangling of sledge-bells, and a loud knocking—a knocking

which threatened to break down the door of the small and humble house she inhabited. Hastily donning the coarse gown and bodice she had recently taken off in order to administer chastisement to her own flesh more thoroughly, she unfastened her bolts and bars, and, lifting the latch, was confronted by Valdemar Svensen, who, nearly breathless with swift driving through the snow-storm, cried out in quick gasps—

“Come with me—come! She is dying!”

“God help the man!” exclaimed Ulrika startled. “*Who* is dying?”

“She—the Fröken Thelma—Lady Errington—she is all alone up there,” and he pointed distractedly in the direction from whence he had come. “I can get no one in Bosekop,—the women are cowards all,—all afraid to go near her,” and he wrung his hands in passionate distress.

Ulrika pulled a thick shawl from the nail where it hung and wrapped it round her.

“I am ready,” she said, and without more delay, stepped into the waiting sledge, while Valdemar, with an exclamation of gratitude and relief, took his place beside her. “But how is it?” she asked, as the reindeer started off at full speed, “how is it that the *bonde’s* daughter is again at the Altenfjord?”

“I know not!” answered Svensen despairingly. “I would have given my life not to have told her of her father’s death.”

“Death!” cried Ulrika. “Olaf Gldmar *dead*! Impossible! Only last night I saw him in the pride of his strength,—and thought I never had beheld so goodly a man. Lord, Lord! That he should be *dead*!”

In a few words Svensen related all that had happened, with the exception of the fire-burial in the Fjord.

But Ulrika immediately asked, “Is his body still in the house?”

Svenson looked at her darkly. “Hast thou never heard Ulrika,” he said solemnly, “that the bodies of men who follow Olaf Gldmar’s creed, disappear as soon as the life departs from them? It is a mystery—strange and terrible! But this is true—my master’s sailing-ship has gone, and his body with it—and I know not where!”

Ulrika surveyed him steadily with a slow, incredulous smile. After a pause, she said—

“Fidelity in a servant is good, Valdemar Svensen! I know you well—I also know that a pagan shrinks from Christian burial. Enough said—I will ask no more—but if Olaf Gldmar’s ship has gone, and he with it,—I warn you, the village will wonder.”

“I cannot help it,” said Svensen with cold brevity. “I have spoken truth—he has gone! I saw him die—and then vanish. Believe it or not as you will, I care not!”

And he drove on in silence. Ulrika was silent too.

She had known Valdemar Svensen for many years—he was a man universally liked and respected at all the harbours and different fishing-stations of Norway, and his life was an open book to everybody, with the exception of one page, which was turned down and sealed,—this was the question of his religious belief. No one knew what form of faith he followed,—it was only when he went to live with the *bonde*, after Thelma's marriage,—that the nature of his creed was dimly suspected. But Ulrika had no dislike for him on this account,—her opinions had changed very much during the past few months. As devout a Lutheran as ever, she began to entertain a little more of the true spirit of Christianity—that spirit of gentle and patient tolerance which, full of forbearance towards all humanity, is willing to admit the possibility of a little good in everything, even in the blind tenets of a heathen creed. Part of this alteration in her was due to the gratitude she secretly felt towards the Guldmar family, for having saved from destruction,—albeit unconscious of his parentage,—Sigurd, the child she had attempted to murder. The hideous malevolence of Lovisa Elsland's nature had shown her that there *may* be bad Lutherans,—the invariable tenderness displayed by the Guldmars for her unrecognized, helpless and distraught son,—had

proved to her that there *may* be good heathens. Hearing thus suddenly of the *bonde's* death, she was strangely affected—she could almost have wept. She felt perfectly convinced that Svensen had made away with his master's body by some mysterious rite connected with pagan belief,—she knew that Gldmar himself, according to rumour, had buried his own wife in some unknown spot, with strange and weird ceremonials,—but she was inclined to be tolerant,—and glancing at Svensen's grave, pained face from time to time as she sat beside him in the sledge, she resolved to ask him no more questions on the subject, but to accept and support, if necessary, the theory he had so emphatically set forth,—namely, the mystical evanishment of the corpse by some supernatural agency.

As they neared their destination, she began to think of Thelma, the beautiful, proud girl whom she remembered best as standing on a little green-tufted hillock with a cluster of pansies in her hand, and Sigurd—Sigurd clinging fondly to her white skirts, with a wealth of passionate devotion in his upturned, melancholy, blue eyes. Ulrika had seen her but once since then,—and that was on the occasion when, at the threat of Lovisa Elsland, and the command of the Reverend Mr. Dyceworthy, she had given her Sir Philip Errington's card, with the false message written on it that had decoyed her for a time into the

wily minister's power. She felt a thrill of shame as she remembered the part she had played in that cruel trick,—and reverting once more to the memory of Sigurd, whose tragic end at the Fall of Njedegorze she had learned through Valdemar, she resolved to make amends now that she had the chance, and to do her best for Thelma in her suffering and trouble.

“For who knows,” mused Ulrika, “Whether it is not the Lord's hand that is extended towards me,—and that in the ministering to the wants of her whom I wronged, and whom my son so greatly loved, I may not thereby cancel the past sin, and work out my own redemption !”

And her dull eyes brightened with hope, and her heart warmed,—she began to feel almost humane and sympathetic,—and was so eager to commence her office of nurse and consoler to Thelma that she jumped out of the sledge almost before it had stopped at the farm gate. Disregarding Valdemar's assistance, she clambered sturdily over the drifted heaps of slippery snow that blocked the deserted pathways, and made for the house,—Valdemar following her as soon as he had safely fastened up the sledge, which was not his own, he having in emergency borrowed it from a neighbour. As they approached, a sound came floating to meet them—a sound which made them pause and look at each other in surprise and anxiety. Some one was singing,—a voice full and

clear, though with a strange, uncertain quiver in it, rippled out in wild strains of minor melody on the snow-laden air. For one moment Ulrika listened doubtfully, and then without more delay ran hastily forward and entered the house. Thelma was there,—sitting at the lattice window which she had thrown wide open to the icy blast,—she had taken off her cloak and hat, and her hair, unbound, fell about her in a great, glittering tangle of gold,—her hands were busy manipulating an imaginary spinning-wheel—her eyes were brilliant as jewels, but full of pain, terror, and pathos. She smiled a piteous smile as she became hazily conscious that there were others in the room—but she went on with her song—a mournful, Norwegian ditty,—till a sudden break in her voice caused her to put her hand to her throat and look up perplexedly.

“That song pleases you?” she asked softly, “I am very glad! Has Sigurd come home? He wanders so much, poor boy! Father, dear, you must tell him how wrong it is not to love Philip. Every one loves Philip—and I—I love him too, but he must never know that.” She paused and sighed. “That is my secret,—the only one I have!” And she drooped her fair head forlornly.

Moved by intense pity, such as she had never felt in all her life before, Ulrika went up and tried to draw her gently from the window.

“Poor thing, poor thing!” she said kindly.

“Come away with me, and lie down! You mustn’t sit here,—let me shut the lattice,—it’s quite late at night, and too cold for you, my dear.”

“Too cold?” and Thelma eyed her wonderingly. “Why, it is summer-time, and the sun never sets! The roses are all about the walls—I gave one to Philip yesterday—a little pale rose with a crimson heart. He wore it, and seemed glad!”

She passed her hand across her forehead with a troubled air, and watched Ulrika, who quietly closed the window against the darkness and desolation of the night. “Are you a friend?” she asked presently in anxious tones. “I know so many that say they are my friends—but I am afraid of them all—and I have left them. Do you know why?” and she laid her hand on Ulrika’s rough arm. “Because they tell me my Philip does not love me any more. They are very cruel to say so, and I think it cannot be true. I want to tell my father what they say—because he will know—and if it is true, then I wish to die,—I could not live! Will you take me to my father?”

The plaintive, pleading gentleness of her voice and look brought more tears into Ulrika’s eyes than had ever been forced there by her devotional exercises,—and the miserable Valdemar, already broken-hearted by his master’s death, turned away and sobbingly cursed his gods for this new and undeserved affliction. As the Italian peasantry fall to abusing their saints in time of trouble, even

so will the few remaining believers in Norse legendary lore upbraid their fierce divinities with the most reckless hardihood when things go wrong. There were times when Valdemar Svensen secretly quailed at the mere thought of the wrath of Odin,—there were others when he was ready to pluck the great god by the beard and beat him with the flat of his own drawn Sword. This was his humour at the present moment, as he averted his gaze from the pitiful sight of his “King’s” fair daughter all desolate and woe-begone, her lovely face pale with anguish,—her sweet wits wandering, and her whole demeanour that of one who is lost in some dark forest, and is weary unto death. She studied Ulrika’s rough visage attentively, and presently noticed the tears on her cheeks.

“You are crying!” she said in a tone of grave surprise. “Why? It is foolish to cry even when the heart aches. I have found that,—no one in the world ever pities you! But perhaps you do not know the world,—ah! it is very hard and cold;—all the people hide their feelings, and pretend to be what they are not. It is difficult to live so,—and I am tired!”

She rose from her chair, and stood up unsteadily, stretching out her little cold white hands to Ulrika, who folded them in her own strong coarse palms. “Yes—I am very tired!” she went on dreamily. “There seems to be nothing that is true—all is false and unreal—I cannot

understand! But you seem kind,"—here her swaying figure tottered, and Ulrika drew her more closely to herself—"I think I know you—you came with me in the train, did you not? Yes—and the little baby smiled and slept in my arms nearly all the way." A violent shuddering seized her, and a quiver of agony passed over her face.

"Forgive me," she murmured, "I feel ill—very ill—and cold—but do not mind—I think—I am—dying!" She could scarcely articulate these last words—she sank forward, fainting, on Ulrika's breast, and that devout disciple of Luther, forgetting all her former dread of the "white witch of the Altenfjord"—only remembered that she held in her arms a helpless woman with all the sorrows and pangs of womanhood thick upon her,—and in this act of warm heart-expansion and timely tenderness, it may be that she cleansed her soiled soul in the sight of the God she worshipped, and won a look of pardon from the ever-watchful eyes of Christ.

As far as mundane matters were concerned, she showed herself a woman of prompt energy and decision. Laying Thelma gently down upon the very couch her dead father had so lately occupied, she sent the distracted Valdemar out to gather fresh pine-logs for the fire, and then busied herself in bringing down Thelma's own little bed from the upper floor, airing it with methodical care, and making it as warm and cosy

as a bird's-nest. While she was engaged in these preparations, Thelma regained her consciousness, and began to toss and tumble and talk deliriously; but with it all she retained her innate gentleness and patience, and submitted to be undressed, though she began to sob pleadingly when Ulrika would have removed her husband's miniature from where it lay pressed against her bosom,—and taking it in her own hand she kissed and held it fast. One by one, the dainty articles of delicate apparel she wore were loosened and laid aside, Ulrika wondering at the embroidered linen and costly lace, the like of which was never seen in that part of Norway,—but wondering still more at the dazzling skin she thus unveiled, a skin as exquisitely soft and pure as the satiny cup of a Nile lily.

Poor Thelma sat resignedly watching her own attire taken from her, and allowed herself to be wrapped in a comfortable loose garment of white *wadmel*, as warm as eider-down, which Ulrika had found in a cupboard upstairs, and which, indeed, had once belonged to Thelma, she and Britta having made it together. She examined its texture now with some faint interest—then she asked plaintively—

“Are you going to bury me? You must put me to sleep with my mother—her name was Thelma too. I think it is an unlucky name.”

“Why, my dear?” asked Ulrika kindly, as she

swept the rich tumbled hair from the girl's eyes, and began to braid it in one long loose plait, in order to give her greater ease.

Thelma sighed. "There is an old song that says——" She broke off. "Shall I sing it to you?" she asked with a wild look.

"No, no," said Ulrika. "Not now. By-and-by!" And she nodded her head encouragingly. "By-and-by! There'll be plenty of time for singing presently," and she laid her in bed, tucking her up warmly as though she were a very little child, and feeling strongly inclined to kiss her.

"Ah, but I should like to tell you, even if I must not sing—" and Thelma gazed up anxiously from her pillow—"only my head is so heavy, and full of strange noises—I do not know whether I can remember it."

"Don't try to remember it," and Ulrika stroked the soft cheek, with a curious yearning sensation of love tugging at her tough heart-strings. "Try to sleep—that will be better for you!" And she took from the fire a warm, nourishing drink she had prepared, and gave it to her. She was surprised at the eagerness with which the poor girl seized it.

"Lord help us, I believe she is light-headed for want of food!" she thought.

Such indeed was the fact,—Thelma had been several days on her journey from Hull, and during

that time had eaten so little that her strength had entirely given way. The provisions on board the *Black Polly* were extremely limited, and consisted of nothing but dried fish, hard bread, and weak tea, without milk or sugar,—and in her condition of health, her system had rebelled against this daily untempting bill of fare. Ulrika's simple but sustaining beverage seemed more than delicious to her palate,—she drained it to the last drop, and, as she returned the cup, a faint colour came back to her cheeks and lips.

“Thank you,” she said feebly. “You are very good to me! And now I do quite know what I wished to say. It was long ago—there was a queen, named Thelma, and some one—a great warrior, loved her and found her fair. But presently he grew tired of her face—and raised an army against her, and took her throne by force, and crowned himself king of all her land. And the song says that Queen Thelma wandered on the mountains all alone till she died—it was a sad song—but I forget—the end.”

And her voice trailed off into broken murmurs, her eyes closed, and she slept. Ulrika watched her musingly and tenderly—wondering what secret trouble weighed on the girl's mind. When Valdemar Svensen presently looked in, she made him a warning sign—and, hushing his footsteps, he went away again. She followed him out into the kitchen, where he had deposited his load of

pine-wood, and began to talk to him in low tones. He listened,—the expression of grief and fear deepening on his countenance as he heard.

“Will she die?” he asked anxiously.

“Let us hope not,” returned Ulrika. “But there is no doubt she is very ill, and will be worse. What has brought her here, I wonder? Do you know?”

Valdemar shook his head.

“Where is her husband?” went on Ulrika. “He ought to be here. How could he have let her make such a journey at such a time! Why did he not come with her? There must be something wrong!”

Svensen looked, as he felt, completely perplexed and despairing. He could think of no reason for Thelma’s unexpected appearance at the Altenfjord—he had forgotten all about the letter that had come from her to her father,—the letter which was still in the house, unopened.

“Well, well! It is very strange!” Ulrika sighed resignedly. “But it is the Lord’s will—and we must do our best for her, that’s all.” And she began to enumerate a list of things she wanted from Bosekop for her patient’s sustenance and comfort. “You must fetch all these,” she said, “as soon as the day is fairly advanced.” She glanced at the clock—it was just four in the morning. “And at the same time, you had better call at the doctor’s house.”

“He’s away,” interrupted Valdemar. “Gone to Christiania.”

“Very well,” said Ulrika composedly. “Then we must do without him. Doctors are never much use, any way,—maybe the Lord will help me instead.”

And she returned to Thelma, who still slept, though her face was now feverishly flushed and her breathing hurried and irregular.

The hours of the new day,—day, though seeming night, passed on, and it was verging towards ten o’clock when she awoke, raving deliriously. Her father, Sigurd, Philip, the events of her life in London, the fatigues of her journey, were all jumbled fantastically together in her brain—she talked and sang incessantly, and, like some wild bird suddenly caged, refused to be quieted. Ulrika was all alone with her,—Valdemar having gone to execute his commissions in Bosekop,—and she had enough to do to make her remain in bed. For she became suddenly possessed by a strong desire to go sailing on the Fjord—and occasionally it took all Ulrika’s strength to hold and keep her from springing to the window, whose white frosted panes seemed to have some fatal attraction for her wandering eyes.

She spoke of things strange and new to her attendant’s ears—frequently she pronounced the names of Violet Vere and Lady Winsleigh with an accent of horror,—then she would talk of George

Lorimer and Pierre Duprèz,—and she would call for Britta often, sometimes endearingly—sometimes impatiently. The picture of her home in Warwickshire seemed to haunt her,—she spoke of its great green trees, its roses, its smooth sloping lawns—then she would begin to smile and sing again in such a weak, pitiful fashion that Ulrika,—her stern nature utterly melted at the sight of such innocent helpless distraction and sorrow,—could do nothing but fold the suffering creature in her arms, and rock her to and fro soothingly on her breast, the tears running down her cheeks the while.

And after long hours of bewilderment and anguish, Errington's child, a boy, was born—dead. With a regretful heart, Ulrika laid out the tiny corpse,—the withered blossom of a promised new delight, a miniature form so fair and perfect that it seemed sheer cruelty on the part of nature to deny it breath and motion. Thelma's mind still wandered—she was hardly conscious of anything—and Ulrika was almost glad that this was so. Her anxiety was very great—she could not disguise from herself that Thelma's life was in danger,—and both she and Valdemar wrote to Sir Philip Errington, preparing him for the worst, and urging him to come at once,—little aware that the very night the lifeless child was born, was the same on which he had started from Hull for Christiansund, after his enforced waiting for the required steamer. There was nothing more to be

done now, thought Ulrika piously, but to trust in the Lord and hope for the best. And Valdemar Svensen made with his own hands a tiny coffin for the body of the little dead boy who was to have brought such pride and satisfaction to his parents, and one day rowed it across the Fjord to that secret cave where Thelma's mother lay enshrined in stone. There he left it, feeling sure he had done well.

Ulrika asked him no questions—she was entirely absorbed in the duties that devolved upon her, and with an ungrudging devotion strange to see in her, watched and tended Thelma incessantly, scarcely allowing herself a minute's space for rest or food. The idea that her present ministration was to save her soul in the sight of the Lord, had grown upon her, and was now rooted firmly in her mind—she never gave way to fatigue or inattention,—every moan, every restless movement of the suffering girl, obtained her instant and tender solicitude, and when she prayed now, it was not for herself but for Thelma.

“Spare her, good Lord!” she would implore in the hyperbolical language she had drawn from her study of the Scriptures—“As the lily among thorns, so is she among the daughters! Cut her not off root and branch from the land of the living, for her countenance is comely, and as a bunch of myrrh which hath a powerful sweetness, even so must she surely be to the heart of her

husband ! Stretch forth Thy right hand, O Lord, and scatter healing, for the gates of death shall not prevail against Thy power ! ”

Day after day she poured out petitions such as these, and with the dogged persistency of a soldier serving Cromwell, believed that they would be granted,—though day after day Thelma seemed to grow weaker and weaker. She was still light-headed—her face grew thin and shadowy,—her hands were almost transparent in their whiteness and delicacy, and her voice was so faint as to be nearly inaudible. Sometimes Ulrika got frightened at her appearance, and heartily wished for medical assistance, but this was not to be had. Therefore she was compelled to rely on the efficacy of one simple remedy,—a herbal drink to allay fever,—the virtues of which she had been taught in her youth,—this, and the healing mercies of mother Nature, together with the reserved strength of her own constitution, were the threads on which Thelma’s life hung.

Time passed on—and yet there was no news from Sir Philip. One night, sitting beside her exhausted patient, Ulrika fancied she saw a change on the wan face—a softer, more peaceful look than had been there for many days. Half in fear, half in hope, she watched,—Thelma seemed to sleep,—but presently her large blue eyes opened with a calm yet wondering expression in their clear depths. She turned slightly on her pillows, and smiled faintly.

“Have I been ill?” she asked.

“Yes, my dear,” returned Ulrika softly, overjoyed, yet afraid at the girl’s returning intelligence. “Very ill. But you feel better now, don’t you?”

Thelma sighed, and raising her little wasted hand, examined it curiously. Her wedding and betrothal rings were so loose on her finger that they would have fallen off had they been held downwards. She seemed surprised at this, but made no remark. For some time she remained quiet,—stedfastly gazing at Ulrika, and evidently trying to make out who she was. Presently she spoke again.

“I remember everything now,” she said, slowly. “I am at home, at the Altenfjord—and I know how I came—and also *why* I came.” Here her lips quivered. “And I shall see my father no more, for he has gone—and I am all—
all alone in the world!” She paused—then added, “Do you think I am dying? If so, I am very glad!”

“Hush, my dear!” said Ulrika. “You mustn’t talk in that way. Your husband is coming presently——” she broke off suddenly, startled at the look of utter despair in Thelma’s eyes.

“You are wrong,” she replied wearily. “He will not come—he cannot! He does not want me any more!”

And two large tears rolled slowly down her

pale cheeks. Ulrika wondered, but forbore to pursue the subject further, fearing to excite or distress her,—and contented herself for the present with attending to her patient's bodily needs. She went to the fire, and began to pour out some nourishing soup, which she always had there in readiness,—and, while she was thus engaged, Thelma's brain cleared more and more,—till with touching directness, and a new hope flushing her face, she asked softly and beseechingly for her child. "I forgot!" she said simply and sweetly. "Of course I am not alone any more. Do give me my baby—I am much better—nearly well—and I should like to kiss it."

Ulrika stood mute, taken aback by this demand. She dared not tell her the truth—she feared its effect on the sensitive mind that had so lately regained its balance. But while she hesitated, Thelma instinctively guessed all she strove to hide.

"It is dead!" she cried. "Dead!—and I never knew!"

And, burying her golden head in her pillows, she broke into a passion of convulsive sobbing. Ulrika grew positively desperate at the sound,—what *was* she to do? Everything seemed to go against her—she was inclined to cry herself. She embraced the broken-hearted girl, and tried to soothe her, but in vain. The long delirium and subsequent weakness,—combined with the secret

trouble on her mind,—had deprived poor Thelma of all resisting power, and she wept on and on in Ulrika's arms till nature was exhausted, and she could weep no longer. Then she lay motionless, with closed eyes, utterly drained in body and spirit, scarcely breathing, and, save for a shivering moan that now and then escaped her, she seemed almost insensible. Ulrika watched her with darkening, meditative brows,—she listened to the rush of the storm-wind without,—it was past eleven o'clock at night. She began to count on her fingers—it was the sixteenth day since the birth of the child,—sixteen days exactly since she had written to Sir Philip Errington, informing him of his wife's danger—and the danger was not yet past. Thinking over all that had happened, and the apparent hopelessness of the case, she suddenly took a strange idea into her head. Retiring to a distant corner, she dropped on her knees.

“O Lord, God Almighty!” she said in a fierce whisper, “Behold, I have been Thy servant until now! I have wrestled with Thee in prayer till I am past all patience! If Thou wilt not hear my petition, why callest Thou Thyself good? Is it good to crush the already fallen? Is it good to have no mercy on the sorrowful? Wilt Thou condemn the innocent without reason? If so, thou art not the Holy One I imagined! Send forth Thy power *now*—now, while there is time!

Rescue her that is lying under the shadow of death—for how has she offended Thee that she should die? Delay no longer, or how shall I put my trust in Thee? Send help speedily from Thine everlasting habitations—or, behold! I do forsake Thee—and my soul shall seek elsewhere for Eternal Justice!”

As she finished this extraordinary, half-threatening, and entirely blasphemous petition, the boisterous gale roared wildly round the house, joining in chorus with the stormy dash of waves upon the coast—a chorus that seemed to Ulrika’s ears like the sound of fiendish and derisive laughter.

She stood listening,—a trifle scared—yet with a sort of fanatical defiance written on her face, and she waited in sullen patience evidently expecting an immediate answer to her outrageous prayer. She felt somewhat like a demagogue of the people, who boldly menaces an all-powerful sovereign, even while in dread of instant execution. There was a sharp patter of sleet on the window,—she glanced nervously at Thelma, who, perfectly still on her couch, looked more like a white, recumbent statue than a living woman. The wind shook the doors, and whistled shrilly through the crevices,—then, as though tired of its own wrath, surged away in hoarse murmurs over the tops of the creaking pines towards the Fjord, and there was a short, impressive silence.

Ulrika still waited—almost holding her breath in expectation of some divine manifestation. The brief stillness grew unbearable. . . . Hush! What was that! Jingle—jangle—jingle—jangle!—Bells! Sledge-bells tinkling musically and merrily—and approaching swiftly, nearer—nearer! Now the sharp trotting of hoofs on the hard snow—then a sudden slackening of speed—the little metallic chimes rang slower and yet more slowly, till with a decisive and melodious clash they stopped!

Ulrika's heart beat thickly—her face flushed—she advanced to Thelma's bedside, hoping, fearing,—she knew not what. There was a tread of firm, yet hurried, footsteps without—a murmur of subdued voices—a half-suppressed exclamation of surprise and relief from Valdemar,—and then the door of the room was hastily thrown open, and a man's tall figure, draped in what seemed to be a garment of frozen snowflakes, stood on the threshold. The noise startled Thelma—she opened her beautiful, tired, blue eyes. Ah! what a divine rapture,—what a dazzling wonder and joy flashed into them, giving them back their old lustre of sunlight sparkling on azure sea! She sprang up in her bed and stretched out her arms.

“Philip!” she cried sobbingly. “Philip! oh, my darling! Try—try to love me again! . . . just a little!—before I die!”

As she spoke she was clasped to his breast,—

folded to his heart in that strong, jealous, passionate embrace with which we who love, would fain shield our nearest and dearest from even the shadow of evil—his lips closed on hers,—and in the sacred stillness that followed, Ulrika slipped from the room, leaving husband and wife alone together.

CHAPTER IV.

"I have led her home, my love, my only friend ;
There is none like her, none !
And never yet so warmly ran my blood,
And sweetly on and on,
Calming itself to the long-wished-for end,
Full to the banks, close on the promised good."

TENNYSON.

BRITTA was in the kitchen, dragging off her snow-wet cloak and fur mufflers, and crying heartily all the while. The stalwart Svensen stood looking at her in perplexity, now and then uttering a word of vague sympathy and consolation, to which she paid not the slightest heed. The poor girl was tired out, and half-numb with the piercing cold,—the excitement, which had kept her up for days and days, had yielded to the nervous exhaustion, which was its natural result,—and she kept on weeping without exactly knowing why she wept. Throughout the long and fatiguing journey she had maintained unflinching energy and perseverance,—undaunted by storm, sleet, and darkness, she had driven steadily over long miles of trackless snow—her instinct had guided her by

the shortest and quickest routes—she seemed to know every station and village on the way,—she always managed to obtain relays of reindeer just when they were needed,—in short, Errington would hardly have been able to reach the Altenfjord without her.

He had never realized to its full extent her strong, indomitable, devoted character, till he saw her hour after hour seated beside him in the *pulkha*, her hands tightly gripping the reins of the horned animals, whose ways she understood and perfectly controlled,—her bright, bird-like eyes fixed with watchful eagerness on the bewildering white landscape that opened out incessantly before her. Her common sense was never at fault—she forgot nothing—and with gentle but respectful firmness she would insist on Sir Philip's taking proper intervals of rest and refreshment at the different farms they passed on their road, though he, eager to press on, chafed and fretted at every little delay. They were welcomed all along their route with true Norse hospitality, though the good country-folk who entertained them could not refrain from astonishment at the idea of their having undertaken such a journey at such a season, and appeared to doubt the possibility of their reaching their destination at all. And now that they had reached it in safety, Britta's strength gave way. Valdemar Svensen had hastily blurted out the news of the *bonde's* death even while she and Sir

Philip were alighting from their sledge—and in the same breath had told them of Thelma's dangerous illness. What wonder, then, that Britta sobbed hysterically, and refused to be comforted,—what wonder that she turned upon Ulrika as that personage approached, in a burst of unreasonable anger.

“Oh dear, oh dear!” she cried, “to think that the Fröken should be so ill—almost dying! and have nobody but *you* to attend to her!”

This, with a vindictive toss of the brown curls. Ulrika winced at her words—she was hurt, but she answered gently—

“I have done my best,” she said with a sort of grave pathos, “I have been with her night and day—had she been a daughter of my own blood, I know not how I could have served her with more tenderness. And, surely, it has been a sore and anxious time with me also—for I, too, have learned to love her!”

Her set mouth quivered,—and Britta, seeing her emotion, was ashamed of her first hasty speech. She made an act of contrition at once by putting her arms round Ulrika's neck and kissing her—a proceeding which so much astonished that devout servant of Luther, that her dull eyes filled with tears.

“Forgive me!” said the impetuous little maiden. “I was very rude and very unkind! But if you love the Fröken, you will understand how I feel—how I wish I could have helped to

take care of her. And oh! the *bonde!*”—here she gave way to a fresh burst of tears—“the dear, good, kind, brave *bonde!* That he should be dead!—oh! it is too cruel—too dreadful—I can hardly believe it!”

Ulrika patted her consolingly on the shoulder, but said nothing—and Valdemar sighed. Britta sought for her handkerchief, and dried her eyes—but, after a minute, began to cry again as recklessly as ever.

“And now”—she gasped—“if the Fröken—dies—I will die too. I will—you see if I don’t! I *w-w-won’t* live—without her!”

And such a big sob broke from her heaving bosom that it threatened to burst her trimly laced little bodice.

“She will not die,” said Ulrika decisively. “I have had my fears—but the crisis is passed. Do not fret, Britta—there is no longer any danger. Her husband’s love will lift the trouble from her heart—and strength will return more speedily than it left her.”

And turning a little aside on the pretence of throwing more wood on the fire, she muttered inaudibly, “O Lord, verily thou hast done well to grant my just demand! Even for this will I remain Thy servant for ever!” After this parenthesis, she resumed the conversation,—Valdemar Svensen sitting silently apart,—and related all that had happened since Thelma’s arrival at the

Altenfjord. She also gave an account of Lovisa Elsland's death,—though Britta was not much affected by the loss of her grandmother.

"Dreadful old thing!" she said with a shudder. "I'm glad I wasn't with her! I remember how she cursed the Fröken,—perhaps her curse has brought all the trouble—if so, it's a good thing she's dead, for now everything will come right again. I used to fancy she had some crime to confess,—did she say anything wicked when she was dying?"

Ulrika avoided a direct reply to this question. What was the good of horrifying the girl by telling her that her deceased relative was to all intents and purposes a murderess? She resolved to let the secret of old Lovisa's life remain buried with her. Therefore she simply answered—

"Her mind wandered greatly,—it was difficult to hear her last words. But it should satisfy you, Britta, to know that she passed away in the fear of the Lord."

Britta gave a little half-dubious, half-scornful smile. She had not the slightest belief in the sincerity of her late grandmother's religious principles.

"I don't understand people who are so much *afraid* of the Lord," she said. "They must have done something wrong. If you always do your best, and try to be good, you needn't fear anything. At least, that's my opinion."

"There is the everlasting burning," began Ulrika solemnly.

"Oh, nonsense!" exclaimed Britta quite impatiently. "I don't believe it!"

Ulrika started back in wonder and dismay. "You don't believe it!" she said in awed accents. "Are you also a heathen?"

"I don't know what you mean by a heathen," replied Britta almost gaily. "But I can't believe that God, who is so good, is going to everlastingly burn anybody. He *couldn't*, you know! It would hurt Him so much to see poor creatures writhing about in flames for ever—we would not be able to bear it, and I'm quite sure it would make Him miserable even in heaven. Because He is all Love—He says so,—He couldn't be cruel!"

This frank statement of Britta's views presented such a new form of doctrine to Ulrika's heavy mind that she was almost appalled by it. God *couldn't* burn anybody for ever—He was too good! What a daring idea! And yet so consoling—so wonderful in the infinite prospect of hope it offered, that she smiled,—even while she trembled to contemplate it. Poor soul! She talked of heathens—being herself the worst type of heathen—namely, a Christian heathen. This sounds incongruous—yet it may be taken for granted that those who profess to follow Christianity, and yet make of God, a being malicious,

vengeful, and of more evil attributes than they possess themselves,—are as barbarous, as unenlightened, as hopelessly sunken in slavish ignorance as the lowest savage who adores his idols of mud and stone. Britta was quite unconscious of having said anything out of the common—she was addressing herself to Svensen.

“Where is the *bonde* buried, Valdemar?” she asked in a low tone.

He looked at her with a strange, mysterious smile.

“Buried? Do you suppose his body could mix itself with common earth? No!—he sailed away, Britta—away—yonder!”

And he pointed out through the window to the Fjord now invisible in the deep darkness.

Britta stared at him with roundly opened, frightened eyes—her face paled.

“Sailed away? You must be dreaming! Sailed away! How could he—if he was dead?”

Valdemar grew suddenly excited. “I tell you, he sailed away!” he repeated in a loud, hoarse whisper. “Where is his ship, the *Valkyrie*? Try if you can find it anywhere—on sea or land! It has gone, and he has gone with it—like a king and warrior—to glory, joy, and victory! Glory—joy—victory!—those were his last words!”

Britta retreated, and caught Ulrika by the arm. “Is he mad?” she asked fearfully.

Valdemar heard her, and rose from his chair, a pained smile on his face.

“I am not mad, Britta,” he said gently. “Do not be afraid! If grief for my master could have turned my brain, I had been mad ere this,—but I have all my wits about me, and I have told you the truth.” He paused—then added, in a more ordinary tone, “You will need fresh logs of pine—I will go and bring them in.”

And he went out. Britta gazed after him in speechless wonder.

“What does he mean?” she asked.

“What he says,” returned Ulrika composedly. “You, like others, must have known that Olaf Güldmar’s creed was a strange one—his burial has been strange—that is all!”

And she skilfully turned the conversation, and began to talk of Thelma, her sorrows and sufferings. Britta was most impatient to see her beloved “Fröken,” and quite grudged Sir Philip the long time he remained alone with his wife.

“He *might* call me, if only for a moment,” Britta thought plaintively. “I do so want to look at her dear face again! But men are all alike—as long as they’ve got what *they* want, they never think of anybody else. Dear me! I wonder how long I shall have to wait!” So she fumed and fretted, and sat by the kitchen-fire, drinking hot tea and talking to Ulrika—all the while straining her ears for the least sound or movement from

the adjoining room. But none came—there was the most perfect silence. At last she could endure it no longer—and, regardless of Ulrika's remonstrances, she stole on tip-toe to the closed door that barred her from the sight of her heart's idol, and turning the handle softly, opened it and looked in. Sir Philip saw her, and made a little warning sign, though he smiled.

He was sitting by the bedside, and in his arms, nestled against his shoulder, Thelma rested. She was fast asleep. The lines of pain had disappeared from her sweet face—a smile was on her lips—her breath came and went with peaceful regularity,—and the delicate hue of a pale rose flushed her cheeks. Britta stood gazing on this fair sight till her affectionate little heart overflowed, and the ready tears dropped like diamonds from her curly lashes.

“Oh, my dear—my dear!” she whispered in a sort of rapture—when there was a gentle movement,—and two star-like eyes opened like blue flowers outspreading to the sun.

“Is that you, Britta?” asked a tender, wondering voice—and with a smothered cry of ecstasy, Britta sprang to seize the outstretched hand of her beloved Fröken, and cover it with kisses. And while Thelma laughed with pleasure to see her, and stroked her hair, Sir Philip described their long drive through the snow, and so warmly praised Britta's patience, endurance, and constant cheerfulness, that his voice trembled with its own

earnestness, while Britta grew rosily red in her deep shyness and embarrassment, vehemently protesting that she had done nothing,—nothing at all to deserve so much commendation. Then, after much glad converse, Ulrika was called, and Sir Philip, seizing her hand, shook it with such force and fervour that she was quite overcome.

“I don’t know how to thank you!” he said, his eyes sparkling with gratitude. “It’s impossible to repay such goodness as yours! My wife tells me how tender and patient and devoted you have been—that even when she knew nothing else, she was aware of your kindness. God bless you for it! You have saved her life——”

“Ah, yes, indeed!” interrupted Thelma gently. “And life has grown so glad for me again! I do owe you so much.”

“You owe me nothing,” said Ulrika in those harsh, monotonous tones which she had of late learned to modulate. “Nothing. The debt is all on my side.” She stopped abruptly—a dull red colour flushed her face—her eyes dwelt on Thelma with a musing tenderness.

Sir Philip looked at her in some surprise.

“Yes,” she went on. “The debt is all on my side. Hear me out, Sir Philip—and you too,—you ‘rose of the northern forest,’ as Sigurd used to call you! You have not forgotten Sigurd?”

“Forgotten him?” said Thelma softly. “Never! . . . I loved him too well!”

Ulrika's head drooped. "He was my son!" she said.

There was a silence of complete astonishment. Ulrika paused—then, as no one uttered a word, she looked up boldly, and spoke with a sort of desperate determination.

"You see you have nothing to thank me for," she went on, addressing herself to Sir Philip, while Thelma, leaning back on her pillows, and holding Britta's hand, regarded her with a new and amazed interest. "Perhaps, if you had known what sort of a woman I am, you might not have liked me to come near—*her*." And she motioned towards Thelma. "When I was young—long ago—I loved——" she laughed bitterly. "It seems a strange thing to say, does it not? Let it pass—the story of my love, my sin, and shame, need not be told here! But Sigurd was my child—born in an evil hour—and I—I strove to kill him at his birth."

Thelma uttered a faint cry of horror. Ulrika turned an imploring gaze upon her.

"Don't hate me!" she said, her voice trembling. "Don't, for God's sake, hate me! You don't know what I have suffered! I was mad, I think, at the time—I flung the child in the Fjord to drown;—your father, Olaf Gldmar, rescued him. I never knew that till long after;—for years the crime I had committed weighed upon my soul,—I prayed and strove with the Lord for pardon, but

always, always felt that for me there was no forgiveness. Lovisa Elsland used to call me “murderess ;” she was right—I *was* one, or so I thought—till—till that day I met you, Fröken Thelma, on the hills with Sigurd,—and the lad fought with me.” She shuddered,—and her eyes looked wild. “I recognized him—no matter how ! . . . he bore my mark upon him—he was my son—*mine* !—the deformed, crazy creature who yet had wit enough to love *you*—you, whom then I hated—but now——”

She stopped and advanced a little closer to Thelma’s bedside.

“Now, there is nothing I would not do for you, my dear !” she said very gently. “But you will not need me any more. You understand what you have done for me,—you and your father ? You have saved me by saving Sigurd,—saved *me* from being weighted down to hell with the crime of murder ! And you made the boy happy while he lived. All the rest of my days spent in your service could not pay back the worth of that good deed. And most heartily do I thank the Lord that he has mercifully permitted me to tend and comfort you in the hour of trouble—and, moreover, that He has given me strength to speak and confess my sin and unworthiness before you ere I depart. For now the trouble is past, I must remove my shadow from your joy. God bless you !—and—and try to think as kindly as you can of me for—for Sigurd’s sake !”

Stooping, she kissed Thelma's hand,—and, before any one had time to speak a word, she left the room abruptly.

When, in a few minutes, Britta went to look after her, she was gone. She had departed to her own house in Bosekop, where she obstinately remained. Nothing would induce her to present herself again before Sir Philip or Thelma, and it was not till many days after they had left the Altenfjord that she was once more seen about the village. And then she was a changed being. No longer harsh or forbidding in manner, she became humble and gentle,—she ministered to the sick, and consoled the afflicted—but she was especially famous for her love of children. All the little ones of the place knew her, and were attracted by her,—and the time came when Ulrika, white-haired, and of peaceful countenance, could be seen knitting at her door in the long summer afternoons surrounded by a whole army of laughing, chattering, dimpled youngsters, who would play at hide-and-seek behind her chair, and clamber up to kiss her wrinkled cheeks, putting their chubby arms round her neck with that guileless confidence children show only to those whom they feel can appreciate such flattering attentions. Some of her acquaintance were wont to say that she was no longer the “godly” Ulrika—but however this might be, it is certain she had drifted a little nearer to the Author of all godliness, which,—after

all,—is the most we dare to strive for in all our differing creeds.

It was not long before Thelma began to recover. The day after her husband arrived, and Ulrika departed, she rose from her bed with Britta's assistance, and sat by the blazing fire, wrapped in her white gown and looking very fragile, though very lovely. Philip had been talking to her for some time, and now he sat at her feet, holding her hand in his, and watching her face, on which there was an expression of the most plaintive and serious penitence.

"I have been very wicked!" she said, with such a quaint horror of herself that her husband laughed. "Now I look back upon it all, I think I have behaved so very badly! because I ought never to have doubted you, my boy—no—not for all the Lady Winsleighs in the world. And poor Mr. Neville! he must be so unhappy! But it was that letter—that letter in your own writing, Philip!"

"Of course!" he answered soothingly. "No wonder you thought me a dreadful fellow! But you won't do so again, will you, Thelma? You will believe that you are the crown and centre of my life—the joy of all the world to me?"

"Yes, I will!" she said softly and proudly. "Though it is always the same, I never do think myself worthy! But I must try to grow very conceited, and to assure myself that I am very

valuable! so that then I shall understand everything better, and be wiser."

Philip laughed. "Talking of letters," he said suddenly, "here's one I wrote to you from Hull—it only got here to-day. Where it has been delayed is a mystery. You needn't read it—you know everything in it already. Then there's a letter on the shelf up there addressed in your writing—it seems never to have been opened."

He reached it down, and gave it to her. As she took it, her face grew very sad.

"It is the one I wrote to my father before I left London," she said. And her eyes filled with tears. "It came too late!"

"Thelma," said Sir Philip then, very gently and gravely, "would you like—can you bear—to read your father's last words to you? He wrote to you on his death-bed, and gave the letter to Valdemar——"

"Oh, let me see it!" she murmured half-sobbingly. "Father,—dear father! I knew he would not leave me without a word!"

Sir Philip reverently opened the folded paper which Svensen had committed to his care that morning, and together they read the *bonde's* farewell. It ran as follows:—

"THELMA, MY BELOVED,

"The summons I have waited for has come at last, and the doors of Valhalla are set

open to receive my soul. Wonder not that I depart with joy! Old as I am, I long for youth—the everlasting youth of which the strength and savour fails not. I have lived long enough to know the sameness of this world—though there is much therein to please the heart and eye of a man—but with that roving restlessness that was born within me, I desire to sail new seas and gaze on new lands, where a perpetual light shines that knows no fading. Grieve not for me—thou wilt remember that, unlike a Christian, I see in death the chiefest glory of life—and thou must not regret that I am eager to drain this cup of world-oblivion offered by the gods. I leave thee,—not sorrowfully,—for thou art in shelter and safety—the strong protection of thy husband’s love defends thee and the safeguard of thine own innocence. My blessing upon him and thee! Serve him, Thelma mine, with full devotion and obedience—even as I have taught thee,—thus drawing from thy woman-life its best measure of sweetness,—keep the bright shield of thy truth untarnished—and live so that at the hour of thine own death—ecstasy thou mayst depart as easily as a song-bird soaring to the sun! I pass hence in happiness—if thou dost shed a tear thou wrongest my memory,—there is naught to weep for. Valdemar will give me the crimson shroud and ocean grave of my ancestors—but question him not concerning this fiery pomp of my last voyage—he is but a serf, and his soul is shaken to its very depths by sorrow.

Let him be—he will have his reward hereafter. And now farewell, child of my heart—darling of mine age—clear mirror in which my later life has brightened to content! All partings are brief—we shall meet again—thou and I and Philip—and all who have loved or who love each other,—the journey heavenwards may be made by different roads, but the end—the glory—the immortality is the same! Peace be upon thee and on thy children and on thy children's children!

“Thy father,

“OLAF GÜLDMAR.”

In spite of the brave old pagan's declaration that tears would wrong his memory, they dropped bright and fast from his daughter's eyes as she kissed again and again the words his dying hand had pencilled,—while Errington knew not which feeling gained the greater mastery over him,—grief for a good man's loss, or admiration for the strong, heroic spirit in which that good man had welcomed Death with rejoicing. He could not help comparing the *bonde's* departure from this life with that of Sir Francis Lennox, the man of false fashion,—who had let slip his withered soul with an oath into the land of Nowhere. Presently Thelma grew calmer, and began to speak in hushed, soft tones—

“Poor Valdemar!” she said meditatively.
 “His heart must ache very much, Philip!”

Philip looked up inquiringly.

"You see, my father speaks of the 'crimson shroud,'" she went on. "That means that he was buried like many of the ancient Norwegian seakings;—he was taken from his bed while dying and placed on board his own ship to breathe his last; then the ship was set on fire and sent out to sea. I always knew he wished it so. Valdemar must have done it all—for I,—I saw the last glimpse of the flames on the Fjord the night I came home! Oh, Philip!" and her beautiful eyes rested tenderly upon him, "it was all so dreadful—so desolate! I wanted—I prayed to die also! The world was so empty—it seemed as if there was nothing left!"

Philip, still sitting at her feet, encircled her with both arms, and drew her down to him.

"My Thelma!" he whispered, "there is nothing left—nothing at all worth living for,—save Love!"

"Ah! but that," she answered softly, "is everything!"

* * * * *

Is it so, indeed? Is Love alone worth living for—worth dying for? Is it the only satisfying good we can grasp at among the shifting shadows of our brief existence? In its various phases and different workings, is it, after all, the brightest radiance known in the struggling darkness of our lives?

Sigurd had thought so,—he had died to prove it. Philip thought so,—when once more at home in England with his recovered “treasure of the golden midnight” he saw her, like a rose refreshed by rain, raise her bright head in renewed strength and beauty, with the old joyous lustre dancing in her eyes, and the smile of a perfect happiness like summer sunshine on her fair face. Lord Winsleigh thought so ;—he was spending the winter in Rome with his wife and son,—and there among the shadows of the Cæsars, his long, social martyrdom ended, and he regained what he had once believed lost for ever—his wife’s affection. Clara, gentle, wistful, with the softening shadow of a great sorrow and a great repentance in her once too-brilliant eyes, was a very different Clara to the dashing “beauty” who had figured so conspicuously in London society. She clung to her husband with an almost timid eagerness as though she dreaded losing him—and when he was not with her, she seemed to rely entirely on her son, whom she watched with a fond, almost melancholy pride, and who responded to her tenderness though proffered so late, with the full-hearted frankness of his impulsive, ardent nature. She wrote to Thelma asking her pardon, and in return received such a sweet, forgiving, generous letter as caused her to weep for an hour or more. But she felt she could never again meet the clear regard of those beautiful, earnest, truthful eyes—never again could she

stand in Thelma's presence, or call her friend—that was all over. Still Love remained,—a Love, chastened and sad, with drooping wings and a somewhat doubting smile,—yet it was Love—

“Love, that keeps all the choir of lives in chime—
Love, that is blood within the veins of time.”

And Love, no matter how abused and maltreated, is a very patient god, and even while suffering from undeserved wounds, still works on, doing magical things. So that poor Edward Neville, the forsaken husband of Violet Vere, when he heard that that popular actress had died suddenly in America from a fit of delirium tremens brought on by excessive drinking, was able, by some gentle method known only to Love and himself, to forget all her frailties—to obliterate from his memory the fact that he ever saw her on the boards of the Brilliant Theatre,—and to think of her henceforth only as the wife he had once adored, and who, he decided in vague, dreamy fashion, must have died young. Love also laid a firm hand on the vivacious Pierre Duprèz—he who had long scoffed at the *jeu d'amour*, played it at last in grave earnest,—and one bright season he introduced his bride into Parisian society,—a charming little woman, with very sparkling eyes and white teeth, who spoke French perfectly, though not with the “haccent” recommended by Briggs. It was difficult to recognize Britta in the *petite élégante* who laughed and danced and chattered her

way through some of the best *salons* in Paris, captivating everybody as she went,—but there she was, all the same, holding her own as usual. Her husband was extremely proud of her—he was fond of pointing her out to people as something excessively precious and unique—and saying—“See her! That is my wife! From Norway! Yes—from the very utmost north of Norway! I love my country—certainly!—but I will tell you this much—if I had been obliged to choose a wife among French women—*ma foi*! I should never have married!”

And what of George Lorimer?—the idle, somewhat careless man of “modern” type, in whose heart, notwithstanding the supposed deterioration of the age, all the best and bravest codes of old-world chivalry were written? Had Love no fair thing to offer *him*? Was he destined to live out his life in the silent heroism of faithful, unuttered, unrequited, unselfish devotion? Were the heavens, as Sigurd had said, always to be empty? Apparently not,—for when he was verging towards middle age, a young lady besieged him with her affections, and boldly offered to be his wife any day he chose to name. She was a small person, not quite five years old, with great blue eyes and a glittering tangle of golden curls. She made her proposal one summer afternoon on the lawn at Errington Manor, in the presence of Beau Lovelace, on whose knee sat her

little brother Olaf, a fine boy a year younger than herself. She had placed her dimpled arms round Lorimer's neck,—and when she so confidently suggested marriage to her "Zordie," as she called him, she was rubbing her rosy, velvety cheek against his moustache with much sweet consideration and tenderness. Lovelace, hearing her, laughed aloud, whereat the little lady was extremely offended.

"I don't tare!" she said, with pretty defiance. "I do love oo, Zordie, and I will marry oo!"

George held her fondly to his breast, as though she were some precious fragile flower of which not a petal must be injured.

"All right!" he answered gaily, though his voice trembled somewhat, "I accept! You shall be my little wife, Thelma. Consider it settled!"

Apparently she did so consider it, for from that day, whenever she was asked her name, she announced herself proudly as "Zordie's 'ittle wife, Thelma"—to the great amusement of her father, Sir Philip, and that other Thelma, on whom the glory of motherhood had fallen like a new charm, investing both face and form with superior beauty and an almost divine serenity. But "Zordie's wife" took her *sobriquet* very seriously,—so much so, indeed, that by-and-by "Zordie" began to take it rather seriously himself,—and to wonder whether, after all, marriages, unequal in point of

age, might not occasionally turn out well. He condemned himself severely for the romanticism of thinking such thoughts, even while he indulged in them, and called himself "an old fool," though he was in the actual prime of manhood, and an exceedingly handsome fellow withal.

But when the younger Thelma came back at the age of sixteen from her convent school at Arles,—the same school where her mother had been before her,—she looked so like her mother,—so very like, that his heart began to ache with the old, wistful, passionate longing he fancied he had stilled for ever. He struggled against this feeling for a while, till at last it became too strong for him,—and then, though he told himself it was absurd,—that a man past forty had no right to expect to win a girl's first love, he grew so reckless that he determined to risk his fate with her. One day, therefore, he spoke out, scarcely knowing what he said, and only conscious that his pulses were beating with abnormal rapidity. She listened to his tremulous, rather hesitating proposal with exceeding gravity, and appeared more surprised than displeased. Raising her glorious blue eyes—eyes in which her mother's noble, fearless look was faithfully reflected, she said simply, just in her mother's own quaint way—

"I do not know why you talk about this at all. I thought it was all settled long ago!"

"Settled!" faltered Lorimer astonished,—he

was generally self-possessed, but this fair young lady's perfect equanimity far surpassed his at that moment—"Settled! My darling! my child—I am so much older than you are——"

"I don't like *boys*!" she declared, with stately disdain. "I was your wife when I was little—and I thought it was to be the same thing now I am big! I told mother so, and she was quite pleased. But, of course, if you don't want me——"

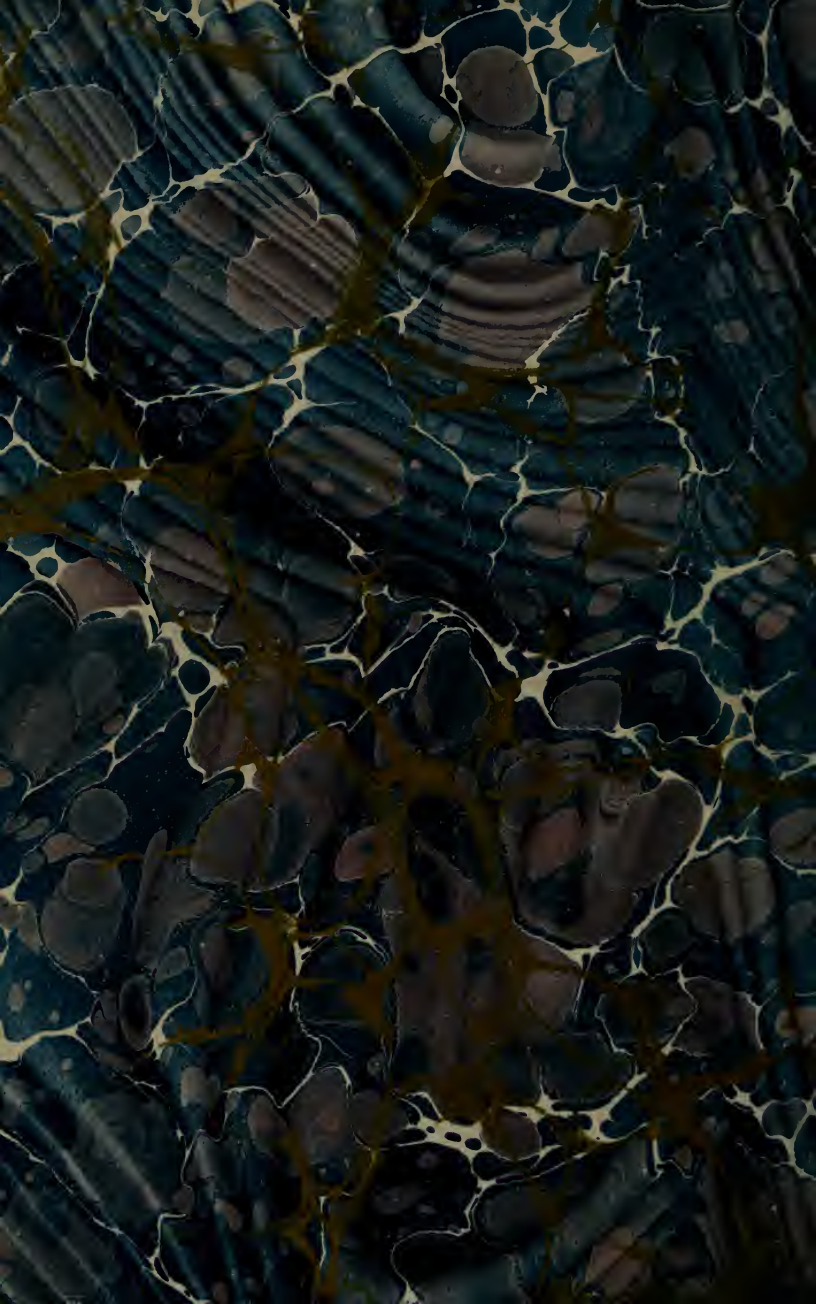
She was not allowed to finish her sentence, for Lorimer, with a sudden rush of joy that almost overpowered him, caught her in his arms and pressed the first lover's kiss on her pure, innocently smiling lips.

"Want you!" he murmured passionately, with a strange, sweet mingling of the past and present in his words. "I have always wanted—Thelma!"

THE END.

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